Meet the Skywalkers
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Meet the Skywalkers

by frodogenic

Summary

Newly returned from the Unknown Regions with Darth Vader, Admiral Piett doesn't expect much of a welcome from the New Republic. And not in a million lifetimes would he have predicted that their very first guest would be Luke Skywalker. After all, Skywalker and Vader are still mortal enemies...right?

Multichapter prequel to Lord Vader's Limpet and Driving Lord Vader.

Chapter 17: Epilogue

Chapter 1

Eriadu looked exactly as revolting as it had twenty-eight years ago, which was a comfort. At least *something* in the galaxy hadn't changed.

Firmus Piett linked his fingers together behind his back and concentrated on projecting the image of a confident, imperturbable admiral. It was an image that had gotten a lot of practice. Two and a half decades of staggering from crisis to crisis – trying to keep the *Executor*'s life support systems tottering along, scraping together the resources to feed and clothe three hundred thousand men, conference after brain-racking conference with navigators, techs, engineers, mechanics…

They had crawled homeward system by uninhabited system until, last month, the ship reached Zonju V. Piett was prepared to wager his hypothetical firstborn child that never in history had a less deserving planet been greeted with such shouts of joy as the *Executor*'s surviving crew members rained on it. It was by any civilized standard a dustball lodged in the back of a closet, but the closet in which it was lodged was their own long-lost galaxy.

Zonju V's list of desirable qualities ended there. Whether one or a thousand turbolasers were trained on them, the destitute colonists could supply little in the way of aid. Of reliable information, they could supply even less. The Empire had collapsed. No, it was at war with a New Republic. No, no, it had signed a peace treaty with the Rebels, what was left of it--no, just some of what was left of it… No two Zonjuvians seemed to have the same opinion on the subject, and indeed had considered the entire outside galaxy purely academic until a Super Star Destroyer materialized in their skies.

As no provisions were to be had, and as Engineering estimated their jury-rigged hyperdrive was only good for another 5 parsecs or so, Lord Vader ordered the ship to jump to Eriadu – the closest hub of commerce and, once upon a time, of Imperial patriotism. In theory, a system capable of producing Wilhuff Tarkin would not yet have forgotten the Empire…whatever remained of it.

The *Executor* had limped into the Eriadu system five days ago, flinging open the gates of all nine Corellian hells in the process. From Piett's vantage point it had been quite the spectacle: cargo ships, tankers, and small craft fleeing for their lives in all directions; the panicking corvettes and patrol ships of the Eriadu Security Force, some opening fire, some scrambling towards the planet and orbital habitats to do gods only knew what in their defense; the incredulous horror of the governor as her frantic plea for peace was answered by a Dark Lord of the Sith who was supposed to be dead…

For several hours, the authorities in Eriadu City persisted in violent skepticism that the ship and her crew were who they claimed to be. When Vader threatened the entire Quintad Council with strangulation by way of proof, the governor's office transmitted declassified Imperial naval reports stating that the *Executor* had been destroyed at the Battle of Endor. Included was a sensor recording from the *Reprisal* in which the computer distinguished a mere two thousandths of a second between the disappearance of the *Executor* and the massive heat signature of the Death Star's explosion.

Piett took a slightly deeper breath as his mind's eye populated the relative quiet of Eriadu with the chaos of that day. He had always known they'd had a close shave – but two thousandths of a second? No human eye could have perceived that the ship had vanished ahead of the explosion. Even had they suspected the possibility, they must have dismissed it when the *Executor* failed to

reappear in the following weeks.

Vader had viewed that recording, stood in silence for a moment or two, and then uncorked wells of cooperation Piett hadn't known he possessed. ComScan busied itself for hours transmitting copies of the ship's log, personnel records, their readouts from Endor, medical files, and anything else that might help knock it through the Eriaduans' heads that this was in fact the *Executor* and her commander was in fact Darth Vader. Conviction finally set in, and the planet began transmitting caches of news records to bring them up to speed on the galaxy's doings.

From the perspective of thousands of Imperial naval officers, not much of the news was good.

The Emperor had never formally chosen a successor; his presumed heir--Vader--had also been presumed dead. Much of the senior military leadership had fallen in action at Endor. So it did not come as a real shock to hear that the Empire had fragmented, factions dismembering each other in the scrum to claim Palpatine's vacant throne; nor that the Rebel Alliance, gathering momentum from its stupendous victory, had finally captured Coruscant and declared the formation of a New Republic.

But it left Piett feeling pointless.

He was captain of a floating anachronism. Even in full fighting trim, the Lady could not re-conquer the galaxy singlehanded. Mention of a surviving Imperial enclave controlling some dozens of systems inspired him only with disgust, as it must anyone who could remember when the mere invocation of Palpatine's name froze the blood of Core World tyrants and Outer Rim primitives alike. The Empire to which he had devoted his life was gone.

Here in the hour of their homecoming, Piett felt more lost than ever.

But he mustn't let the crew see it. They no doubt felt the same emptiness that he did, the same fear of what future might await them in this New Republic governed by their enemies of old, the same torment of not knowing whether reunion with loved ones would be possible. For their sakes he must continue to be the incarnation of confidence and poise.

For once, he was actually glad of Lord Vader. Whatever else you might criticize about Vader's leadership style (and Piett had a laundry list twelve lightyears long), the man was never at a loss. You might not know what his plan was, but you knew he had one and that he expected it to succeed. Not to say he was infallible but he did have a sound grasp of strategy, at least when his temper didn't interfere.

Piett glanced at Eriadu's besmirched surface again. At the moment Vader was making his first trip planetside to speak with the shell-shocked governor in person. Hopefully the woman survived the encounter. Killing local authorities was unlikely to go over well with the new lords and masters of the galaxy.

He twitched his lip. Perhaps he was wasting his concern. It was a thousand to one against that they could convince the New Republic the galaxy was big enough for it and the *Executor*--unless someone influential interceded on their behalf, but what prominent ex-Rebel would lend *Darth Vader* a helping hand? The New Republic Navy was no doubt scrambling a battle squadron at this very moment to corner the *Executor* in Eriadu. Piett snorted. Little did they know he had barely a score of operational turbolaser mounts on the whole ship, after all the parts they'd had to cannibalize to keep vital systems online.

Still, it was useful to be feared, and he intended to maintain the illusion of a lethal warship for as long as possible.

"Admiral!" The voice belonged to Ensign Chimmel from ComScan, now forty-six, the poor bastard; not many opportunities for promotion in the Unknown Regions. "We have a cordon breach in zone thirteen."

Piett joined him at the console.

"Sensors say it's a personal transport, sir," Chimmel told him, as if the admiral's bars on Piett's uniform automatically rendered him unable to interpret a standard sensor readout. "I can't match it to any known models. Military-grade drive, though."

Piett frowned. "Just one?"

"Yes, sir. Unless she has buddies coming in ballistic or under cloaking."

"If she did, she'd be under radar with them." Piett massaged his fingers behind his back, weighing whether to bring his last surviving forward bridge battery online against the trespasser. But the last thing they needed was a firefight. Besides, zone thirteen pointed Coreward straight down the Hydian Way. The transport might be a new arrival in system, out of touch with current events; and though any sane being would steer clear of an unknown Super Star Destroyer, the galaxy was regrettably full of fools, not all of whom could be prevented from operating starships. And with databanks a quarter of a century past their expiration date, ComScan was probably going to run across hundreds of unfamiliar ship designs. "Hail her and order her to stand off."

Chimmel keyed on his set. "Unknown starship, this is Imperial Naval Ship *Executor*. Be advised you are breaching the ceasefire cordon. Withdraw immediately to one million kilometers."

A text-only transmission flashed back onto the readout: CONFIRM OPERATIVE RECOGNITION CODE: HAPSPIR, BARRINI, CORBOLAN, TRIAXIS. In the corner of the screen appeared an alert icon--the Imperial Security Bureau's Field Operations insignia, surmounted by a stylized glove.

Piett jolted back. He jerked his gaze across the viewports as if he could physically see the pilot of the incoming ship.

Chimmel was studying the icon in confusion; he had probably never encountered that variation before. Stars knew there'd been no occasion for it recently. "Sir? How should I proceed?"

"Request them to stand by, Lieutenant," he ordered. "And get me a secure line to Lord Vader."

He hustled (discreetly) to the holocom deck and initiated top-secret coms protocol, sealing himself off from anyone else's hearing. He had not had to contact Vader with a priority signal in decades, but the man answered as inscrutably as if it was the fifth time that day. "Admiral. What is it?"

"My lord, we are being approached by an unidentified personal transport. They transmitted us an operative recognition code." He swallowed. "It appears to be one of the Emperor's Hands."

"Which code?" Vader demanded.

"It began Hapspir, Barrini."

Vader was silent for a moment. "Permit them to board the ship, but do not allow their arrival to become a matter of general knowledge. Clear the hangar in which they land and hold them there. I will return to the ship and deal with them myself."

Piett ended the transmission and returned to the bridge. Once upon a time they'd had a black ops

hangar specifically designed for these sorts of occasions, but like most places on the ship not essential to daily survival, it was out of commission. Instead he bugged out Hangar Bravo Five--home in the old days to the pilots of the 501st, all lost at Endor--and ordered a security cordon of the area. He handed the watch off to Captain Venka and proceeded alone to the hangar bay, his throat tight.

The Emperor's Hand…it felt like being visited by a ghost from another universe. All he could remember was that they had answered directly to Palpatine, and supposedly shared Vader's occult powers. Why had the Hand come? To recruit them to war on the Empire's behalf, or offer allegiance in the assumption that Vader intended to restore the old status quo? To assassinate Vader, for failing to save their shared master?

Whatever the Hand's agenda, one thing was almost guaranteed--it wasn't going to line up with Piett's agenda for a peaceful retirement.

I'm too old for this sort of thing.

The lift deposited him inside the hangar in time to see the mystery ship looming outside the bay doors. It certainly had never come from any Imperial assembly line. Offhand, he judged it to be an extensively modified SoroSuub *Horizon*-class yacht. Aftermarket cannon mounts poked noses out here and there, and that extended aft hatch must be big enough to accommodate a snub fighter--but she retained the SoroSuub grace, feathering down beautifully on the deck without a whisper.

Nothing to worry about, Piett told himself, proceeding to the base of the extending ramp. Even if the Emperor's Hand *had* crossed the galaxy to take Vader's head off his shoulders, he/she/it likely wasn't going to give the Dark Lord advance notice by offing his admiral first.

Afterwards--now that was a distinct possibility, but one thing you learned serving under Vader was that each day had enough trouble of its own. Piett posed himself at attention and projected all the imperturbability forty years in uniform could bestow.

A hooded figure appeared at the top of the ramp, hesitated for a long moment, and then made its way down. "Admiral," said a man's voice. Piett felt a prickle in his memory. Could he have run across this Hand once before in the old days, perhaps unknowingly?

A gloved hand offered itself to him. Piett shook it. "Welcome aboard the *Executor*, Agent." He had spent some of the trip from the bridge debating what title to use. "Emperor's Hand" sounded a bit…obsolete.

"Ah. I have a confession to make," said the man. "I'm not an Imperial agent."

Shavit, thought Piett. *Should have brought a sidearm after all.* He hadn't bothered to stop by the bridge armory, reasoning that if Palpatine's pet viper wanted to kill a decrepit old admiral, a blaster wouldn't do much for his odds. "I beg your pardon?"

The man brushed his hood back. He had darkish hair, close-trimmed scruff on his chin, bold blue eyes, assorted scars testifying to a long history of close scrapes. The prickle of memory became a violent itch. Where had he seen those eyes before? Not in person--no--*wait a second--surely that isn't--*

"I'm Luke Skywalker."

Piett's mouth hung open without permission.

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Chapter 2

It was Skywalker alright. Though twenty-five years had left their mark, Piett had needed only the name to see straight through them to the boyish face that had appeared at the top of the agenda on every Death Squadron command meeting and planning session for three years. Skywalker--what memories that name conjured. Reports of friends and comrades lost at Yavin, the attack on the Rebel base at Hoth, the late unlamented Admiral Ozzel, the madness of the asteroid field, Vader's terrifying silence in the aftermath of Bespin, scores of sleepless nights and dogged searches and false leads and arrivals five minutes too late and rumors and bounty hunter scum…

…and what the *hells* could have sent *this* man racing into Vader's reach the moment he had word of his return?

"What a pleasant surprise," Piett managed. "After all this time."

"I'm here to see Vader." Skywalker projected pure calm, but Piett had seen that deliberate façade in his own mirror too many times to be fooled. The man was agitated, working hard not to show it--and at his waist, just peeking out from behind the dark long coat, hung what was unmistakably a well-used lightsaber.

Piett's stomach swooped. Twenty-five years ago Vader had been in his physical prime (or as close to it as a man in a life support suit could get) and Skywalker had been a callow youth, lucky to escape Bespin in only two pieces. But Vader was now an aged man, and Skywalker's scuffed weapon warned that he would no longer have the advantage of experience either.

He ought to be pleased at the prospect of being rid of Vader, at long last. But against all odds, Vader had improved with age. Perhaps it was all those years in the wild of uncharted space, dependent on his crew for survival, but truth be told Piett had thought him much changed even immediately after Endor--as though Palpatine's death had broken some sort of curse. For one thing, nobody had danced the midair jig since then. And he had shared too many troubles with the man for too many years to turn his back now.

No--for better or for worse, Piett was on Vader's side. *Damn him.*

"Lord Vader is not here," he told Skywalker. "He is on Eriadu liaising with the planetary officials." He knew better than to try lying to a Force-sensitive--but with any luck Skywalker would take his ship out to chase him down, and they could bring one of those functioning batteries to bear; or Vader could join the battle in space. Physical strength counted for nothing in a dogfight.

"He's coming." Skywalker's eyes blazed with disquieting conviction. "He knows I'm here."

Piett pursed his lips in dismay. If that was so--and even though Skywalker was a mass murderer, it was hard to picture him lying--then Vader had given his orders knowing full well it was no Emperor's Hand come to call.

But perhaps Vader just didn't want to admit he was also too old for this sort of thing.

"He may be several hours coming," Piett argued, though he didn't think for an instant it was true.

"It's been twenty-five years. I can wait a few more hours."

Piett shoved all his chips into the pool. "If you intend to stay, you'll do it under arrest, Skywalker. There's no statute of limitations on your warrant." At least he could go to his grave in the knowledge they'd finally caught the slippery son of a Sith, albeit a quarter-century too late--

Skywalker laughed. Whatever toll the years had taken, his eyes looked as young as they had the first time Intel had handed around holos of the pilot who'd destroyed the Death Star. It had made Piett's gorge rise, that far-too-young face. It had made him wonder what had gone so wrong that a boy like him would end up doing a thing like that.

"Fair enough, Admiral. I surrender." And to his surprise, Skywalker took the lightsaber off his belt and offered it, the emitter facing towards his own body. "Break out the binders too, if it makes you feel more comfortable."

From just about anybody else this would have been sarcastic bravado. From Skywalker it sounded sincere. That was worse.

"I don't think that will be necessary." After all, the man hadn't exactly been dragged aboard kicking and screaming…besides which, Piett didn't have any binders. Fleet admirals rarely had occasion to arrest anyone in person. "This way."

He led the way towards the lift to the vacant bay control room, affording a broad view of the hangar through its window. Inside, he turned the lightsaber over in his hands and wondered what to do until Vader got there.

"Well," he said. "Lord Vader will be delighted to see you, I'm sure."

Either Skywalker missed the threat or just didn't care. "You're very loyal to him." He paced up and down the room, arms clasped behind his back and the long loose coat swinging behind him. The mannerism reminded him so much of Vader that, under other circumstances, Piett would have been tempted to laugh.

"I have served with Lord Vader for many years." That was a good stock answer.

"You probably know him better than I do."

Piett frowned. Was it just his overwrought nerves or had Skywalker sounded…almost…*envious*?

"I would have thought you of all people would have been glad to see the back of him, Commander."

Skywalker gave a little laugh. "You're in good company. It isn't Commander anymore, though."

"You'll forgive me if I don't follow the insurrectionist promotion boards." Piett did not bother about sounding diplomatic. Skywalker could afford to be diplomatic; Skywalker had not devoted three years of his life to obsessively hunting Piett, reviewing reports about Piett, studying holos of Piett, watching his fellow officers be throttled because they'd let Piett escape…

"I resigned from active duty eighteen months after Endor." Skywalker abandoned his pacing and leaned forward on his palms on the rim of the viewport, staring out into the hangar.

"Why?" Piett blurted. Skywalker turned a raised eyebrow towards him. "Surely…surely the war can't have ended so quickly." *Surely the Empire can't have been that weak.*

"It didn't. I had other things to pursue." He turned his gaze back to the window. "I fought for the Alliance because I believed it was right, not because it was what I aspired to do with my life."

Again Piett saw that young face that had so disturbed him. Back then--occasionally, privately--he'd used to wonder about the ifs. What if the boy had grown up on a more civilized planet, within reach of the Empire's light? What if he'd transmitted that application to the Academy that investigators found drafted in the computer terminal of his blasted-out home? What if the stormtroopers on that recovery operation had had the common decency not to slaughter two ignorant farmers in cold blood?

He had never allowed those questions to linger; they were too much like empathy, and empathy with Rebels was treason. Besides, from his perspective, the Rebellion always took the form of blips in scanner readouts--occasionally, if they were close enough, of rundown ships gunning away from the Lady for dear life. Intellectually you might acknowledge that the corvette your gunners had just liquidated had contained several hundred sentients with dreams, fears, hopes, loved ones. But what you saw was a flash of plasma and atomized matter.

Face to face with the enemy for the first time, Piett dared to ask. "What did you aspire to be, if not a Rebel?"

Skywalker smiled mournfully. "I wanted to be like my father."

Intel had been clear that Skywalker was the orphan of a Jedi. Piett could imagine the rest. The boy had grown up with a gaping father-shaped hole in his life, pouring into it the stories others told him or that he told himself; and of course the man of the stories had been a splendid hero, a rescuer of the oppressed, a fearless victor against overwhelming odds--an ideal that likely bore little resemblance to the man as he'd actually been.

What if his father had been there? Piett hastily dismissed the thought. Skywalker's father had been a Jedi traitor. His death had been in his son's best interests, though Skywalker had chosen to deny that fact.

But what boy wanted to believe he had a monster for a father? A weight like that crippled a child. In Skywalker's place, Piett might not have fared any better. "Do you think you've succeeded?"

Skywalker stared out the viewport. "I'll find out soon." He straightened up and paced down the room, back again, leaned at the window.

"You intend to kill him, don't you?" Piett clenched the lightsaber in his hand, though he doubted he could stop Skywalker from reclaiming it if he chose.

Skywalker shot him a startled look. "My father?"

"Lord Vader," Piett snapped.

Skywalker relaxed slightly. "Of course not."

Just as though it went without saying that two mortal enemies could get along perfectly well provided they took a twenty-five-year break from one another. "Then what are you doing here?"

Skywalker's composure cracked. He laughed, sat down in the closest chair and ran his left hand through his hair. "I didn't exactly plan it out. I just blasted out for Eriadu. I suppose I need to see if it's really him."

"Of course it's him." Was he going to spend the rest of his days answering that question?

"And if he's who I think he is," Skywalker added cryptically.

"Those are questions worth risking your life for?"

"It wouldn't be the first time." Skywalker looked up at Piett. "What about you, what do you think of him? You must be closest to him of anyone."

"I don't think close is the word for it." Piett ignored Skywalker's nod at an opposite seat. No Rebel prisoners were going to play host to him on his own ship. And Skywalker *was* his prisoner. Maybe if he told himself that enough times, he'd believe it.

"Do you think he's a good man?"

Piett stared at the Rebel, eyebrows lurching. "I beg your pardon?"

"You've been with him for decades." Skywalker's gaze remained nailed on him. "Do you think he's a good man?"

He had to force himself not to gape. "I--I would not presume to--"

"To have an opinion about a man you've worked with that long?" Skywalker's eyebrows arched.

"Why are you asking me this?"

"I asked him at Endor," said Skywalker. "I want to know if the answer has changed."

"At *Endor*? Were you not busy giving an encore of your famous performance at Yavin?"

"No. I was with him on the Death Star."

A dim memory flared--a shuttle with an old clearance code, requesting to land on the Sanctuary Moon, and Vader's ominous *leave them to me*. "Lord Vader captured you on the forest moon."

"Not exactly. I turned myself in."

His eyebrows lurched again. Skywalker's mouth quirked, as if to share Piett's disbelief at his younger self's colossal stupidity. "How did you escape?"

"He let me go."

Vader had never breathed a word about this encounter. Piett took himself back to those initial weeks after Endor--that strange mingling of relief and grief that he had thought he sensed in the man and assumed was his own hyperactive imagination. Had Skywalker had a part in…whatever change had been effected?

"Lord Vader is a hard man," he said at length. "But for the past many years, not a cruel one. Such hardships as we have faced can alter lives. And…" He paused, for what he wanted to say still felt like treason. But Skywalker would hardly mind. "I think that the Emperor incited the worst in him. The removal of his influence has permitted better tendencies to flourish." He allowed his purported prisoner a civil little smile. "On occasion, I even suspect he likes me."

Skywalker had hung on his every word; now Piett saw an agony of hope in his eyes, hastily hidden. "Thank you. I'm glad he's had you."

Piett blinked at this comment from left field, and was still trying to figure out what the hell should be done with it when Skywalker twisted to the window. A lambda shuttle loomed outside the bay doors, making its way to a landing. Piett glanced at a chrono. Only half an hour--then Vader must have been already en route when he took the call. Skywalker stood abruptly, gripping the edge of

the console until the fingers on his left hand turned white. The shuttle set down, the ramp extended, and the next moment a familiar towering black form sped out, headed for the lift.

A shuddering, deep breath drew Piett's attention back to Skywalker, now leaning heavily forward on his hands, his head down and eyes closed and mouth set, as if doing battle with some dragon deep inside. *Why did he really come? Who would choose this?*

The door of the observation office opened. The familiar rhythm of the respirator filled the air.

"My lord," Piett began--but he stopped right there. Vader did not, at this moment in time, seem aware there existed any such man as Firmus Piett. He had frozen in the gangway, his entire attention riveted on Skywalker. The Rebel had yet to move or look up. Warily, Piett backed out of the line of fire, planning to make his escape once Vader stopped blocking the only exit.

Silence stretched between the two archenemies for more than a minute, Skywalker's breathing nearly as harsh as Vader's.

Vader took a step forward. "Young one…"

Like a shockball bat to the side of his head, the thought hit Piett that Vader was at a loss for words. *What in blazes happened on that battle station?*

Skywalker looked up. Wet tracks ran down both sides of his face; he made no effort to conceal them. He seemed unable to even speak. Vader approached and settled a strangely gentle hand on Skywalker's shoulder. Skywalker's gloved right hand seized Vader's wrist, and there they stood in silence for what seemed an eternity. Sheer consternation chased all thought of leaving from Piett's mind.

Skywalker found words first, none too dignified. "Are you fracking immortal?"

Piett heard a sound he hadn't known Vader could make--at least, he thought that odd hiccup in the respirator was a laugh. "Assuredly not."

"This vanishing-for-two-decades act is getting old."

Vader squeezed Skywalker's shoulder. "I have no intention of repeating the performance."

Skywalker nodded and straightened up, mopping his face quickly with his sleeve. "Good. I think your admiral would disapprove."

Vader, thus made to realize he and his obsession had an audience, skewered Piett with a stare. In his fright Piett's fingers tightened on the lightsaber, which happily provided him with something to say. "Ah--my lord--he was carrying this." He held out the lightsaber not so much towards Vader as away from himself. What the hell was going on here?

Vader took the weapon and handed it casually back to Skywalker. "Have you made a practice of volunteering to be arrested?"

"Only when I know you're coming to bail me out." Skywalker restored it to his belt with a smile.

"And supposing I had not arrived in time to dissuade someone from executing you? You have no friends aboard this ship, young one."

Skywalker raised an eyebrow. "Maybe I'm better connected than you think."

"Indeed. Where did you obtain that operative recognition code?"

"A friend."

Vader hooked his thumbs in his belt and loomed. "Are you aware that your *friend* was a trained assassin answerable only to the Emperor?"

Skywalker widened his eyes. "No shavit?"

"None, young one."

Joy, thought Piett, glancing at the ship out on the pad. Perhaps Skywalker had been a distraction all along. Perhaps he'd return to find his bridge full of slit throats.

"Kriff," said Skywalker. "Guess I should have let Han run that background check before I married her."

Dead silence answered this comment; the respirator even paused. Piett counted four heartbeats before Vader said… "Jade?"

"Jade Skywalker," said Skywalker. "What, no congratulations?"

Piett really should have skedaddled, but this bizarre conversation between the erstwhile second-in-command of the galaxy and his ex-Rebel adversary held him rapt with its hooks.

"Young one, that woman has orders to--"

"Kill me, yes, she reminds me twice a day or so." He sat back on the arm of the chair, enjoying himself to no end. "You know what that makes you?"

Vader regarded Skywalker in--horror? The man could feel horror?

"Her father-in-law," Skywalker supplied.

"I am aware of the relationship," Vader snapped. "What I want to know is what possessed you to initiate it!"

"What can I say, it was love at first death threat--"

Right then, like a podracer at 800 klicks an hour, the full import of what he'd heard belatedly slammed into Piett's brain.

"My--my lord--forgive me, but am I to understand that--that he's your--Skywalker, I mean, is--"

Vader glanced at him. "Is it such a world-shattering concept that I could have a son, Admiral?"

"Yes, actually, it is," Skywalker retorted. "I'm sorry, Admiral, he doesn't communicate these things well. Believe me, I know."

"You should demonstrate more respect, young one," Vader boomed. His index finger, never on the sidelines long, sprang off his belt toward Skywalker's nose.

"You think *I'm* disrespectful? You should have heard Leia when the transmission came in from Eriadu City. Even Han didn't recognize all the names she called you."

Vader waved a hand in dismissal. "I expect such behavior from your sister."

Piett had to sit down.

"You could at least try to break it to him gently," Skywalker reproved. "Admiral, your pardon."

Piett waved the apology off feebly.

"In the same way you are breaking your news to me?"

Skywalker inclined his head. "Fair enough."

"Your sister is…well?"

"Very."

"And has not yet had the sense to rid herself of that Corellian nuisance?"

"Married him. Three kids."

"I see."

"Jaina, Jacen, and Anakin."

Vader's respirator stumbled. Skywalker produced a pocket holoprojector and switched on a holo of three dark-haired teenagers. "Jaina and Jacen are twins. Anakin's a couple of years younger."

Vader took the projector and studied the fresh faces of his three grandchildren. Piett felt a stab in his chest. Vader had always stood aloof--even when the man was at his homicidal worst, there had been a sort of consolation in believing that he was an invincible superman, that no pain or fear could touch him. In this moment he seemed almost frail.

Vader clicked to the next holo, which featured a small redheaded child sitting inside a washing unit and clutching a multitool that his gleeful expression made it clear he was not supposed to have. Wiring hung haphazardly around the little head. "And this one?"

"That's Ben," said Skywalker. "He's ours."

Vader's hand moved as if to reach for the child, remembered whose body it was part of, and jerked back into its proper place. "Is it a current holo?"

"A couple weeks ago. He just turned eighteen months." Skywalker grinned outright. "I forgot to lock the repair kit on the counter. He levitated that multitool out and tried to take the washer apart from the inside."

"I see he has inherited his father's proclivity for wreaking havoc on any orderly system."

"Talk about the Toydarian calling the Jawa cheap," Skywalker shot back.

"Are you suggesting your criminal tendencies are *my* fault, young one?"

"It's not like I'm the first person in the family to overthrow a galactic government, is it?"

"I will grant that your sister began the enterprise at least a year ahead of you."

"She's an overachiever. Speaking of which, I should probably mention she's Chief of State now."

Piett cleared his throat to reintroduce himself to the conversation at this critical juncture. "Beg

pardon--did you say your sister's name is Leia? As in the Princess Leia Organa?"

"That's her."

So much for our chances of a sympathetic reception. Piett swore in torrents under his breath.

"She has Sixth Fleet mobilizing at Yag'Dhul. Sixteen dreadnoughts, plus the *Guardian* coming in from Fondor."

"The *Guardian*?"

"An *Executor*-class Super Star Destroyer," Vader said.

Piett was positive there had been no *Guardian* on the Fleet rosters before Endor, but had long since given up questioning his commander's routine omniscience. He just pressed a hand to his forehead, feeling the familiar sensation of the future crumbling to pieces before his eyes. "Yag'Dhul. They won't be long getting here, then."

Skywalker turned a steady gaze to Piett. *He* did not seem perturbed that an entire battle fleet was gunning for the dilapidated ship on which his life currently depended. Then again, if anyone had experience dealing with such a situation it would be Skywalker. "I know. That's why I got here first. "

It needed no Jedi to sense Vader's surge of wrath at this comment. "You should have outgrown such recklessness by now, young one," he snarled. "Depart this ship at once."

"Make me," Skywalker said, in a tone which added *old man*.

"Do not tempt me." Vader stalked down the length of the control room, perhaps in hope of finding something less consequential than a son to kill at the far end. "I am not so decrepit as you seem to think."

"You're getting worked up over nothing," said Skywalker, who had apparently missed the memo about not condescending to Sith Lords. "She isn't going to blow up this ship once she knows I'm on it."

Vader whirled on him. "You flew into an imminent war zone *without telling anyone*?"

"Easier to ask forgiveness than permission. Skywalker life motto. Is your holocom working?"

"You have been left to your own misguided devices for far too long," Vader snapped. "I should not have killed Obi-Wan so quickly--"

"Let's not go there, Father." That was what convinced Piett that Skywalker truly was Vader's son--the anger. Though Skywalker kept it muzzled on a tight chain, Piett recognized that dangerous beast. "Is it working?"

Vader made a disgusted noise. "Admiral, take him to the holocom deck and allow him to call whom he wishes. I will be in my meditation chamber. Do not disturb me." He swooped toward the hatch, clearly having had all the insubordination he could take for one day.

As he passed, Skywalker murmured, "I missed you, you know."

Vader stopped for a cycle or two of the respirator. He half turned. "It is good to see you well, son. The admiral will show you to my quarters when you have finished." He pointed a finger. "And then

we will revisit the question of forgiveness versus permission."

He precipitated himself away. The hatch shot closed and Skywalker blew out an exhausted sigh as he thudded into a seat, leaning forward with elbows on his knees. "We ought to put you in for a medal," he told Piett. "Twenty-five years and you're still sane. How do you do it?"

"Twenty-eight," said Piett. "I make a point of not provoking him."

"I don't think I can help that."

"Then it's a good thing he likes you as much as he does."

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tbc

Chapter 3

Skywalker stayed locked away in the holocom chamber for forty-five minutes. When he reappeared he looked twice as exhausted as before. Piett felt a vague nausea which could not be put down to out-of-date rations.

"I take it your sister is less than pleased?"

Skywalker pinched the bridge of his nose. "Let me put it this way--imagine taking my father's temper, compressing it into a third of the volume, and pumping it full of estrogen."

Piett contemplated that charming image for a minute or two before deciding there was really only one thing to say. "Would you care to join me for a drink?"

"Please," said Skywalker fervently.

Piett led the way to the lounge, quite empty at this hour. "I'm afraid all I can offer is some concoction our crew calls starshine. I should warn you it may very well be made of seventy-five percent recycled engine coolant."

Skywalker took a tumbler, grinning as Piett filled it. "You don't want to know what *we* used to make it out of."

Piett raised an inquiring eyebrow.

"Let's just say it's amazing how many things you can do with a tauntaun." He tossed back the tumbler in one go.

"You're right, I don't want to know." Piett offered the decanter again. "Unless you wish to rejoin Lord Vader?"

"Not just yet. That was a lot for anyone to absorb."

Piett raised his glass in fervent agreement. He would have liked to escape to the privacy of a meditation sphere himself; but somebody had to be the diplomat on this ship and stars knew, it wasn't going to be Lord Vader. "So, you're retired from insurrection. What fills your time these days?"

"I teach."

"Teach what?"

"Jedi Knights. I established a praxeum. About two hundred students have come through now."

Piett tried, and failed, not to be visibly disgusted at the word *Jedi*. Generously, Skywalker changed the subject.

"Occasionally I also serve as a guest instructor at the Flight School on Anaxes. One of my old wingmates is the commandant now."

The words *Anaxes* and *Flight School* triangulated with the name *Skywalker* and generated one of the compliments he had been failing to invent. "I understand you once aspired to attend the

Academy. I have often thought it was greatly to our loss that you did not."

Skywalker planted his drink on the credenza, a bit too forcefully. "I'm afraid personal difficulties intervened."

On second thought, that had been a bad subject to touch on. Like a falling monkey-lizard lunging for a vine, Piett snatched for a tangent. "I suppose you received your training through the Alliance, then?"

"It was more of a practical exam. I only got an hour of sim time before they sent us up at Yavin."

Piett's glass stopped halfway to his lips. "My gods. What were they thinking?"

Skywalker shrugged. "There wasn't much of an alternative if the Alliance was going to live another day."

Piett had had friends on that station who hadn't lived another day, courtesy of the man drinking his booze. "A glorious victory, indeed." He took a rather long swallow.

"An expensive one."

Piett's lip curled. "I'd say the rate of exchange that day was solidly in the Rebellion's favor. Have you any idea how many personnel were assigned to that station?"

"One million, five hundred and fifty-six thousand, two hundred and ninety-six." Skywalker's rock-steady gaze held his. "Not including any civilians or unregistered detainees who might have been aboard. And just getting me a chance to take the shot cost forty-six men their lives, one of them my oldest friend. I call that an expensive victory, yes."

"Nobody twisted your arm, Skywalker," Piett snapped. "You chose to get in that cockpit."

He shrugged. "True. I suppose I could have stayed home and been shot with my aunt and uncle instead. Or gotten to Alderaan a couple of hours earlier and been vaporized with the other two billion people there. Would that have been the upstanding thing to do?"

Piett retreated uncomfortably toward the viewport. "I don't condone the deaths of civilians. The Empire made mistakes, I grant you." He grasped his hands behind his back and turned back to Skywalker. "But it was worth serving, nonetheless."

Skywalker helped himself to a seat and leaned his elbows on his knees, bestowing on his host what might be the most disarming smile in the known galaxy. For the millionth time that afternoon, Piett tried to work out how you could plug a Darth Vader into one end of the reproductive cycle and get a Luke Skywalker at the other. *What a woman his mother must have been.* "I never said the Empire had no good features. You sure had us beat for military discipline."

"Of course we did. You were a ragtag band of juvenile delinquents and deserters."

"No argument there. There were probably fifty times my squad just about saved the Empire the trouble of killing me."

Piett waged war with a treacherous grin. "We would have had to get our hands on you first. Your talents as an escape artist border on the supernatural, as I remember."

Skywalker grinned in turn. "My wife calls it the Tatooine Corollary to Murphy's Law--any situation involving a Skywalker will immediately escalate to the worst possible scenario, then be

resolved in the least probable fashion."

"Ah," said Piett. "That explains Bespin. And Endor. And Hoth…"

"Kothlis," said Skywalker, thinking back. "You'd have been there too."

Piett made a noise of mild interest. "I was never convinced you were actually on Kothlis."

"Why's that?"

Piett waved a dismissive hand. "Bounty hunters. Those scum will say anything to make a credit."

"Hey now. Those were some of the most considerate bounty hunters I've ever met. I almost felt bad for escaping." He held up his thumb and forefinger, an urchin-like glint in his eye. "Almost."

"Is that why you spent half a day hidingin the asteroid belt?" They had wasted hours supervising recon flights in and around that damned asteroid belt, all because Lord Vader insisted he could sense a "locus for the Force" within it. This was not the kind of intelligence that qualified as actionable in Piett's book, nor indeed the book of anyone whose name was not Darth Vader. After twelve hours and nine minutes he had actually dared to tell the man so. Not two minutes later a ship had darted out of the belt, lingering just long enough for Vader to turn an indisputably smug look at Piett before it scooted to hyperspace.

"That's the *Falcon* for you. Fastest hyperdrive in the galaxy, unless you actually need to use it. Ever tried to hotwire a motivator assembly without blueprints while sonic sounding charges are hammering over your head?"

"No…but I *have* had to respectfully disagree with Lord Vader's orders a time or two."

Before either of them knew it they were laughing uproariously.

"You missed your calling, Skywalker," Piett said, stepping into the antechamber of Vader's quarters. "You should have been a diplomat."

Skywalker, sitting cross-legged on the floor doing something mystical, raised an eyebrow. "Why's that?"

"Our scopes have just registered the *Millennium Falcon* approaching from the outer system. I shall not doubt your powers of persuasion again."

After monopolizing Piett's holodeck for several days, Skywalker claimed he had convinced his sister to extend a truce long enough to speak in person with their father. Vader had been hibernating (one could not call it *sulking* and expect to live) ever since, leaving Piett to make all the arrangements for welcoming a galactic ruler in style until Skywalker robbed him of even this small comfort by informing him that the visit was being conducted in secret and formal receptions were therefore off-limits.

"You don't persuade Leia, you outlast her." Skywalker, who despite his forty-plus years had the knees of a Juvenian grasshopper, stood up hands-free and rapped on the outer shell of Vader's sealed hyperbaric chamber.

A pointed silence held for thirty seconds before the egglike chamber hatched a glowering Sith Lord. "What is it you want?"

"They're here. Will you come to the hangar with me?" He flicked a mischievous grin at Piett. "I'm technically under arrest."

Vader stood and boomed, "Behave yourself, or I will be inclined to keep you that way."

Piett tailed them to the hangar. He had not been specifically invited, but he hadn't been forbidden either, and therefore felt at liberty to indulge his curiosity under the pretense of being a considerate host.

They arrived in time to see the *Millennium Falcon* just setting down on her landing struts. *My gods*, Piett thought to himself, *that thing's still flying.* Idly he wondered what percentage of it had been replaced since he last laid eyes on it. None of the components looked less than three decades old. Perhaps Solo bought ready-junked ship parts.

"I see Captain Solo's maintenance standards remain nonexistent," Vader seethed. He seemed to consider the appearance of his son-in-law's starcraft a personal affront, as though Solo had collected decades of dents and dings for the sole purpose of annoying him. "That freighter would lower the value of a junkyard."

"Bantha shit," said Skywalker. "You're just jealous she isn't yours."

"That ship should be so lucky."

"Only over Han's dead body."

From his vantage point on Vader's right side, Piett saw the man finger his lightsaber longingly, eyes on the *Falcon*'s cockpit.

The landing ramp descended. Piett clasped his hands behind his back to stop a slight nervous shaking. True, their fate depended on this meeting going well, and true, the odds of that were practically nil, but to betray any concern over this would be unprofessional.

Two minutes crept by with no sign of any passengers.

Vader shifted.

Four minutes.

Vader paced. Skywalker tensed slightly.

Five minutes.

"Perhaps Captain Solo has forgotten the combination to unseal his smuggling compartments?" Vader suggested. "I seem to recall they are his preferred travel arrangement."

Skywalker shot him a reproving look. "Just be patient."

Piett felt the beginnings of a cold sweat coming on.

Seven minutes.

With a sharp intake of breath, Vader stormed towards the ramp. He was just ducking under the overhang of the ship when a blaster bolt greeted him from within. The Dark Lord's hand flashed

up--and to the goggle-eyed amazement of Piett, the bolt bounced off into the hull of the ship. His glove wasn't even singed.

Three decades and the man still had cards up his sleeves.

"Well, sweetheart," shouted someone inside, "it's your old man alright!"

Beside Piett, Skywalker gave a short groan and kneaded his forehead.

TBC

Chapter 4

The door to the *Executor*'s stellarium had been locked for exactly twenty-one minutes and forty-seven seconds. In the adjoining officers' club silence reigned supreme, challenged only by the thump of Piett's heart, the rustle of cards, and the periodic growls of Han Solo.

"If she's not out in five minutes I'm cutting the door down," the Corellian snarled, drawing Skywalker's attention from the hand he had been contemplating.

"She's fine, Han. She's in no danger." He dropped a datachip on the table. "I see your favor from Talon Karrde and raise you a recording of the time Jacen put the crystal snake in Mara's boot."

"Like hell she's not," Solo growled, but dragged his eyes away from the door.

"Admiral, it's your move," said Skywalker calmly.

Piett studied his hand without enthusiasm. He had accepted a spot at the table before realizing that his companions scoffed at the notion of playing for mere credits. *What the Sith; in for a TIE, in for a Death Star.* "I see your recording," he said, picking up the very last sample-sized flask of real Whyren's on the ship and adding it to the pot. He'd been saving it for twenty years to celebrate the day he made it back to Axxila, but it wasn't as though the galaxy proper had any shortage of the stuff; and besides, it wasn't every day a man had a chance to win not only the favor from Karrde and the recording, but a genuine scrap of the original Rebel flag from the base at Yavin IV, a paper entitling the bearer to a free one-night stay at the Magisterial Suite of the Kaadara Grande Hotel on Piknar, and the framed state portrait of the Emperor still hanging on one of the bulkheads of the officer's club.

Skywalker, as dealer for the round, opted for a randomization. Piett gave a disgusted grunt as his King of Coins transformed into a totally worthless Four of Sabers. He threw his cards in; at the rate this pair went, if he stayed in the betting they'd win the *Executor* herself out from under him. Skywalker raised an eyebrow at Solo.

Solo eyed his cards, then the datachip. "Does Mara *know* you have that recording? Last I heard she bought Jacen off for five hundred credits."

The revelation that Solo's teenage son was an accomplished blackmailer failed to surprise Piett at any level.

"Won it from her fair and square," said Skywalker, a slightly-too-bright beacon of innocence. "She'll tell you so herself."

Solo grunted. "She's still buying that Jedi-Masters-don't-cheat-at-sabacc line of yours, huh?"

"Amazing what you can get away with when you have such a straight-up honest farm boy face." Skywalker winked at Piett, who glared, full of sudden suspicions as to whether Jedi could manipulate card randomizers as well as minds. There had been a distinctly mercenary glint in Skywalker's eye when the Emperor's portrait was added to the pot.

Solo rummaged in his pockets for something to stake, and Skywalker suggested, "There's always the deed to the *Falcon*."

"Dream on, kid." Solo glared once more at the entrance to the stellarium. "I'm gonna need it for the getaway any second now."

"You've got his lightsaber, what more do you want?"

Solo glanced at the hilt sitting next to his elbow, the final concession he had demanded before--not at all graciously--agreeing to this private tete-a-tete between his wife and his father-in-law. He had also insisted on the Princess taking his blaster, though after Vader's demonstration in the hangar Piett couldn't imagine what protection Solo thought this would give her. "Not much, just five minutes with him unconscious in a carbon freezing chamber." He plunked a key chip on the table. "Combination to Booster Terrik's exotic weapons locker on the *Errant Venture*."

"Call. Double-autographed copy of Face Loran's promo portrait for *The Little Black Bantha Cub.*" Skywalker slid a dog-eared printed card forward, depicting a revoltingly adorable child astride a bantha and gazing in raptures up at an Imperial flag; an enormous childish signature sprawled across one corner and a very tiny adult one skulked in the white border. Piett wondered how much of Skywalker's luggage was dedicated to arcane betting materials for Rebel-style sabacc. "Anyway, has it ever crossed your mind that you maybe had the whole carbonite thing coming?"

They turned their cards up, and Solo scowled as his run of Staves slammed into the duracrete wall of Skywalker's Idiot's Flush. "Whose side are you on anyway, kid?"

"I'm just saying"--Skywalker scraped the pot over to his side of the table--"suppose *you* had a carbon freeze chamber handy and some cousin of Isolder Chume decided to dance the tongue tango with Jaina right in front of you--"

Solo brandished Vader's extinguished lightsaber at his brother-in-law. "Mention that Hapan scumbag again and I'll send Mara copies of those godawful poems you wrote for that Ysanna chick way back when." He put the lightsaber down to shuffle, muttering under his breath, "Fianceé-stealing sonofahutt…"

"I wouldn't do that if I were you. Be a shame if Leia ever found out the reason you ducked out of the Dubrovna conference was because Xaverri What's-her-name commed you from the cantina down the street."

"Dubrovna?" A newborn akk pup could not have rivaled Solo's wide-eyed *who-me* innocence as he suddenly became absorbed in dealing. "I don't remember visiting Dubrovna."

"Amnesia," Skywalker told Piett, "caused by a sudden onset of marriage. Besides"--returning his attention to Solo--"imagine how good you're going to look once Father realizes who his son-in-law *could* have been."

Solo brightened. "There's that."

Piett surveyed his latest lackluster hand, brain elsewhere. "Isn't Isolder Chume the Crown Prince of Hapes?" He was trying to work out how Solo came out ahead in such a comparison. Or any comparison, really.

"Prince Consort, now that he's married," said Skywalker, and Solo added with wicked satisfaction, "His wife's a real witch."

"Can't knock her taste in men though."

"*Men* ain't the word I'd've used, kid."

Piett glanced between the two sniggering overgrown adolescents. "I'm afraid I don't follow you."

"See, what happened was--" Skywalker paused, then shook his head. "Never mind. It'd take too long."

Solo slapped his cards together with a pleased look and tapped the bottom corner of the stack on the table. "What do you gents feel like losing this round?"

"Let's see how much you really like that hand." Skywalker, that mercenary glint back in his eye, casually tossed another datachip onto the table between them. "One vintage Black-Alpha-level Ubiqtorate security clearance."

Piett, who had taken an opportunity to fortify his nerves with starshine, choked on it. "Did you--did you just bet your wife's Imperial operative codes?"

Skywalker shrugged the shrug of someone who knows his ex-assassin wife is several hundred lightyears away from his jugular. "I live on the edge."

Piett shook his head, but Solo grinned like a krakana, leaning casually forward on one forearm. "Too bad for you you're still an easy read, kid."

And he rolled Vader's lightsaber forward.

Skywalker whistled silently and sat back, gaze traveling to Piett, who stared at his hand with the expression of a man trying to decide whether to grab the ticking thermal detonator and attempt to dispose of it, or just run like hell. "You do realize," he told Solo, "he's almost certainly going to kill you?"

"Gotta match the stakes," said Solo. "Besides, it ain't a game of Rebel sabacc until you bet your neck."

Piett eyed him an instant longer, pressed his lips into a thin line, and tossed his cards in. How these maniacs had lasted even two weeks during the war would forever escape him--

Something crashed against the other side of the sealed stellarium door. All three men jumped; then Solo bolted towards the hatch, cards scattering as he snatched the lightsaber off the table. Skywalker caught his elbow. "Han--don't. It's all right."

"Yeah, sure!" Solo barked. "They're probably just playing Daddy-Daughter smashball in there!"

"She needs to do this. Like I needed to."

"Wonderful! That really sets my mind at ease!" Solo's face contorted in his trademark exaggerated delight. "How 'bout we have her stick a fork in a power socket too, just so she gets the full experience? Unless Old Raisinface plans on popping the casket next."

He stuck a thumb over his shoulder at the bulkhead. Piett tried to ignore the way the portrait of the Emperor suddenly seemed to be scowling in his direction.

"Han, if she's throwing things at him, it's a good sign. Otherwise you two would be divorced by now." Skywalker clapped Solo on the shoulder and sat back down. Solo had enough faith in the Jedi's sixth sense to refrain from charging the door again, but the spell of the game had been broken and he stayed on the balls of his feet, thumb on the saber's ignition key and one eye hanging on the hatch.

"How do you know it's *her* throwing things at *him*?"

"Because Lord Vader doesn't have to," Piett told him.

Solo huffed. "Are you his admiral or his publicity manager?"

"I'm the man who has stayed on his good side for twenty-eight years," said Piett. "You managed… about two seconds, wasn't it?"

"Two seconds?" Solo looked affronted. "I'm a hell of a lot faster draw than that."

"My point precisely, Captain."

Solo leaned in, a beaming sun of sarcasm. "It's General, actually."

"My profound apologies. The Rebellion must have been harder up for senior officers than I thought."

Solo started to bluster, but at that moment the stellarium door cycled open and the conversation was interrupted by the dulcet tones of a Chief of State in high dudgeon.

"--wouldn't know a constitutional precedent if it kicked you in the codpiece!" The Princess fumed through, Vader looming on her heels a moment later. Piett instinctively leapt to his feet and backed up a step in response to his highly developed sense of self-preservation; Solo, on the other hand, took two steps closer. Either the bravest husband this side of Corellia, or a complete idiot; Piett's money was on the latter. The imperturbable Skywalker stayed where he was and raised an eyebrow at his father.

"Tell me again how I'm the disrespectful one?"

"You both are," Vader grunted, with no particular malice. Piett noticed his gaze still trailing after the Princess as she stalked over to the bar, shoved Piett out of the way with a scowl--ye gods, if looks could kill hers would be a Death Star--and snatched a bottle from behind the counter. The next moment she flung a hand to her throat, eyes watering.

"What is this, Echo Base vintage?"

"Don't worry," said Skywalker, "your taste buds go numb after the first shot or two."

Vader's mask spun from daughter to son. "How is this a reason *not* to worry?"

The Princess, ignoring him, took another swig. "Ah. You're right."

"I do not think you should--" Vader began.

"You," said the Princess sweetly, "can stay the hells out of it." She tipped the bottle back again, but a moment later slammed it down on the bar. "*Kriff* that is awful."

"Brings back memories, don't it, Your Worshipfulness?" Solo had joined her by the bar. "Course, we got Darth Nostalgia here for that." He fired his maddening lopsided smirk at Vader.

"If you wish to revisit the past I would be happy to oblige you more thoroughly on the detention level, Solo."

"Tempting, but"--Solo wrapped a possessive arm around the Princess and leaned back on his elbow against the bar--"I don't think you want to tick off *my wife* quite that much. Gonna have to come to

grips with the situation, Pops."

Vader, with nothing but a flex of his right hand, contrived to suggest that the aspect of the situation he most wished to grip was Solo's throat. A shade of alarm intruded on the Princess' face. "Easy on the swagger, nerfherder." She wove her arm around his back, pulling herself in against him more closely. "I'm not interested in raising three kids on my own."

"Want to find a cabin and shoot for four?" Before Vader could even bristle, Solo dipped her in one arm and swooped in for the longest, loudest tongue-writhing that had ever disgraced this ship. Piett looked away with a disgusted noise.

Vader loomed over his son. "I hold *you* responsible for this."

"Me? What did *I* do?"

"You are her brother. You should have protected her from being seduced by such a disreputable oaf."

Skywalker winced. The Princess, still lip-locked with the oaf in question, burst out laughing as Solo hauled her back upright, purple with wrath. "Who died and made you the galaxy's marriage expert?"

Vader flicked a finger. His lightsaber ripped itself out of Solo's hand, spun around in midair, and hovered within what would be striking range the instant the blade ignited. "Are you volunteering, Solo?"

Solo's hand darted for his blaster, but it was still on his wife's hip and she had too much common sense to draw it, so his gaze turned to Skywalker--who wasn't even *watching*. The Jedi had gone back to studying the remains of the last hand of cards as if all was well with the world. "Some backup you are, kid," Solo growled, and Piett couldn't fault him.

Skywalker made a slight gesture. The weapon arced backwards and re-hooked itself to Vader's belt.

"What are you, nuts? Why'd you give it back to *him*?"

"You already lost it." Skywalker pointed to the cards he had laid out. His triple Princes had outscored Solo's Royal Wedding by two points. Piett hoped to the stars Vader wouldn't bother to wonder what the connection was between his lightsaber and a game of sabacc. "What are you going to do with a lightsaber anyway?"

Solo eyed it with regret. "They make great arc-welders."

"They make better guillotines," Vader thundered, turning towards the door.

"Always gotta have the last word, don't you?" Solo bellowed after him.

Vader spun, forefinger locked and loaded. "There are plenty of ways to ensure that *you* do not, Captain. Do not tempt me to demonstrate them."

"General," drawled his son-in-law.

"What?"

"It's *General* Solo."

Vader stared at him for a full cycle of the respirator before his gaze traveled to the Princess. "Tell me, Princess, do I have Bail Organa to thank for teaching you such execrable judgment in life partners?"

"Hardly," snapped the Princess. "I inherited *that* from my mother."

Skywalker abruptly had a coughing fit into the sleeve of his robe; for which Piett was grateful, as it distracted Vader from his similarly afflicted admiral.

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Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

> A brief note about the setting: I am an Army brat emeritus. US military bases and ships have non-denominational chapels, which are designed so that they can be adjusted to suit any major religion or religious denomination. Ages back when I was writing another fic, the passing thought came to me that the Executor probably would have had such a chapel on board.

Piett slipped inside the hush of the shipboard chapel gratefully. Given the range of religious creeds that were likely to be represented by a crew of three hundred thousand, the designers had had to be creative. The spaced projection nodes on the walls could be configured to the iconographies of over a million belief systems, and in combination with an elaborate set of localized gravity generators could also project opaque "bulkheads" to shape the interior space into whatever form a particular gathering preferred – circular, pyramidal, spherical, dodecahedral, even the tri-dimensional zero-gravity Enlightenment Maze stipulated by the Fourth Post-Beejian Sanctum of Souls. For Piett it had always been a refuge from the pressures of his command, whether Vader's homicidal rages of yore or the torments of survival in the Outer Rim.

Today it represented a much-needed escape from the Skywalker clan. It had been about two standard days since the *Falcon*'s arrival. That was forty-seven hours more than he needed to realize that while sharing a ship with Vader was trial enough for any man, sharing one with Vader and his daughter – even one the size of *Executor* – was purgatory.

The lights were set to dim, and the room was in meditation phase, configured into comfortable seats lining the bulkheads and calm symphonic music misting from hidden speakers. The projectors cast stylized white flowers on the walls, intertwined with some flowing ancient script he couldn't begin to read. He had never seen this particular mode, but it could not have been better calculated to soothe his fraying nerves. Piett lowered himself into a seat out of sight of the hatch and closed his eyes, absorbing peace into his aching frame. There was a scent of incense in the air.

Belatedly, he realized this had to mean someone else was here.

He opened his eyes and spotted a partition towards the front. Further circumspect investigation revealed the resentment-inducing form of the Princess, cross-legged on a plain square of carpet and lighting a series of tapers in a sand-filled tray on the floor in front of her. Half an hour's freedom from the crucible had been all he wanted, and the blasted woman had to interfere even with that –

The next moment his petulance failed him; it had occurred to him why he had never seen the chapel configured this way before. There were, of course, no Alderaanians in Lord Vader's crew.

"You needn't leave." Her soft alto stopped him as he turned to go.

"I don't wish to intrude on your privacy, Your Highness."

"Please, don't consider it an intrusion."

So the she-nexu has sheathed her claws for a change. Wonders never cease. He folded his hands behind his back and approached, reminding himself that this was a person whose bad side he could afford to be on even less than Vader's. "I didn't expect to meet you here, Your Highness. I assumed you shared your family's religion."

"I do," said the Princess. He watched her light another taper of incense, murmuring a musical prayer in an ancient language that – the thought struck him suddenly – was likely to die with her generation.

"I meant the – Jedi beliefs of your brother."

"Being a Jedi isn't a religion, Admiral." The long-shafted vesta in her hand traced a wavering symbol in the air in front of the new-lit taper.

"Well," he said awkwardly, "I have only observations of Lord Vader for my information." Vader was a one-man Inquisition; benighted souls who questioned the existence of the Force in his hearing got catechized instantly and never forgot it.

She paused, lit the next taper, and said, "He's a Sith Lord. If being a Jedi were a religion, he would count as a heretic."

Her calm surprised him. She had spent the past two days erupting with volcanic violence and unpredictability, and Piett had concluded, darkly, that she was her father's daughter – but as the ghostly echoes of Alderaan now reminded him, she had resounding reasons for being short-tempered at the moment. If he had woken up one morning to the news that his estranged father, a domineering sorcerer who had personally tortured him and authorized the destruction of his entire planet, had reappeared from the netherworld after twenty-five years, he might not react with much restraint either.

"Pardon my ignorance," Piett ventured after watching for a few more minutes. "But is there much difference?" She stared at him, incredulous, and he added defensively, "From the outside, they look very much alike. All mystic meditation and lightsabers and arcane wizardry and what have you."

"This is the difference." She blew out the match.

"I see," lied Piett.

She wasn't fooled. "Or, as Han likes to say, Sith are homicidal and Jedi are only suicidal."

In spite of all his disdain for the Princess' crude Corellian, Piett chuckled. "An apt description. Your husband has a most singular manner of expressing himself."

"And quite a way with people, too." The Princess sat back, twirling the snuffed match between her fingers. She favored him with a smile that, for once, did not mean *if you say one more word I'll rip your arms off.* "My aunts would have had coronaries if they'd met him."

"How many aunts?"

"Three, on Baba's side. They were determined to make a proper princess of me if it killed them." Her smile faded. "I suppose in the end it did."

Her gaze fell back to the incense tapers, watching the flames consume them.

"Memorial prayers," she said after a minute. "I…needed to go home for a little while."

"I know the feeling, Your Highness. I haven't been home to Axxila in nearly thirty years."

"You'll be back soon."

Her wide soulful eyes studied the dead head of the match. Old chasm-deep grief rolled out from her, as palpable as her hair-trigger temper had been for the past two days. *You just choose the best conversation topics*, Piett growled at himself, *don't you, you idiot.* All those years in the Unknown Regions, at least he'd had the comfort of knowing that home was out there somewhere – that the possibility of sitting down to a midnight snack with his nephew, seeing again the view from his childhood bedroom window, walking down Essker Street, leaning on the fence around his old school for a good long reminiscence, and getting a cup of spiced touri at the café down the corner from his grandmother's house existed, even if the odds towered against him. But Leia Organa Solo could never show her children where she'd played as a little girl, never laugh over childish trinkets she'd treasured, never retread a favorite trail. The scope of what the Empire had taken from the orphans of Alderaan staggered him suddenly.

"I'm afraid that must depend on the outcome of your negotiations with Lord Vader," he murmured. His present train of thought had not inspired much hope that said outcome would be positive.

The dead match kept turning between her fingers. Finally she murmured, "I'd be doing the galaxy a favor if I just shot him."

From someone other than the commander-in-chief of the New Republic Defense Force, this would have been a laughable notion; but Piett kneaded his fingers, imagining the *Guardian* and Sixth Fleet descending on Eriadu on a tide of scarlet death, dissolving the inconvenient *Executor* into a cloud of twinkling, dissipating vapor. "Would you, really?"

She did not laugh, only traced the blackened head of the match with her thumb. "You and Luke are the only two people who'd miss him. I guarantee it."

If only he could argue that point. "Perhaps, but – "

"But what?"

In her monotone he heard the thudding accusation of too many atrocities to count, and struggled against it to collect his thoughts. This might be his only chance to make their case to the only person in the galaxy who could give him and his men their lives back. But what *was* the case? It wasn't as if he could claim with a straight face that serving under Lord Vader had been an uninhibited pleasure. And all his reasons for serving, all the good he'd believed the Empire capable of, seemed fiber-thin in the face of what she had suffered at its hands. "I can't justify some of the things he did in the Emperor's name. But it was the Emperor who – "

"He stood behind me when Tarkin gave the order to fire on Alderaan." She stamped out each word like a hydraulic press. "He watched two billion people die without lifting a finger. And you want me to excuse that on the grounds that he was following orders?"

He swallowed, half-expecting the ghost of Lorth Needa to materialize and lend its spectral weight to the Princess' case. Ozzel had deserved what he got, but Needa? It had been murder, pure and simple – and gods, how Vader had enjoyed it. He'd taken his time, actually stopped short four times and prodded Needa to apologize again, as if *this* time he might forgive what should never

have been a crime in the first place. And at the end, when he finally tired of the game, that sickening courtesy that was all the more nauseating because none of them had known before that Vader could sound charming when he was in the mood for it: *Apology accepted, Captain Needa*.

Piett shut his eyes, trying to banish the ghost. "I do not intend to offer a defense for actions which were indefensible, but – "

"No. Instead you're asking for mercy where there should be justice."

"Perhaps I am," Piett bit out. Diplomacy be damned; she didn't have a monopoly on suffering, after all, she didn't understand what it was like to spend three decades trying to *live* with a man who cheered himself up by murdering people. He'd earned a little mercy, blast it all! "But I have three hundred thousand crewmen to consider. Their fate will likely depend on his. Since I doubt that Lord Vader will try to defend himself, that responsibility falls on me."

She closed her eyes, her mouth pinched shut. Her fingertips went white on the match, threatening to break it in half. "No," she said after a long time. "No, he didn't."

Piett's indignation vanished in a surge of foreboding. "What do you mean he *didn't*?"

"In the stellarium." She was close to losing control now, fighting on in jolts. "He told me to shoot. If I wanted to." A low, rasping laugh jerked out from her. "Do you know what it's like to want to kill your own father?"

It was the first time he'd heard her use the word *father* in reference to Vader. He wished he knew whether it was a good sign or a bad one. "No," he said stiffly. "I don't."

She stared at her hands, fresh anger twisting on her face. "The worst of it is I thought I'd finally forgiven him. But the moment he said that I had the blaster out." The match bowed further in her still-white fingers, a whisper of pressure away from snapping. "I wanted to pull that trigger as much as I would have on the Death Star."

"Like no time had passed at all," Piett murmured to his boots. "I know how you feel."

"Oh?" She raised an eyebrow with a sudden flicker of black humor. "Are you in line to kill him too?"

"No," Piett said instantly – a spinal reflex, but an honest one all the same. "But I felt a little the same way when your brother arrived."

"And what exactly did Luke ever do to you?"

"It was more a ripple effect, if you will. Lord Vader – " Piett belatedly realized that going into the details wouldn't do his present agenda any favors. "Lord Vader was very...difficult to please while we were searching for him," he amended. "We've come a long way together since then, and I can understand the sense of accomplishment that comes with laying old demons to rest. But as I found out when your brother showed up the other week, they have ways of resurrecting when we least expect them…"

He trailed off pensively, thoughts straying to all those horrible moments, Lorth Needa most especially, and to what the Princess had just told him. That Vader might feel remorse for any of the lives he'd destroyed was…a strange thought. Not in his wildest flights of fancy had Piett indulged such a notion. He had trained himself not to expect miracles, not to dream of real justice; Darth Vader answered to no one but their indifferent Emperor, and then there wasn't even an Emperor, so mere survival had become the summit of Piett's hopes.

But it turned out there *was* somebody who could and would hold Darth Vader accountable for his actions…Vader himself. Piett shook his head slowly. Who would have believed there was still a man's conscience buried in that black-hearted hulk –

– Skywalker. *Skywalker* had believed it – that day on Endor, he must have.

But how? Piett, like the Princess, could hardly wrap his mind around it when the evidence was shoved in his face – yet Skywalker had somehow found faith enough to gamble his life on it when there was no evidence at all. He'd looked Piett's brand of pragmatic survivalism in the eye and scorned it, preferring instead to risk body and soul on a one-in-a-million chance of winning over someone so entrenched in hate and guilt he'd murdered his own officers and written off entire Star Destroyers with nary a shrug, just so he could get close enough to his own son to maim him.

Neither Piett nor the Princess came naturally by such complete self-abandonment. At bottom, in their own ways, they were both survivors, like Vader himself…but in the reverent hush of the chapel, contemplating the kind of love that could strike an Empire to its knees with a few words, Piett suddenly felt the inferiority of survival. As Vader must have, that day over the forest moon.

He shook himself out of his reverie and found the Princess was watching him keenly. "Well. Just because our ghosts catch up with us every now and then doesn't negate the progress we've made. You *didn't* shoot him, after all."

"I haven't shot him *yet*," she said. "He made it clear it was a standing offer." She smiled bitterly at his horrified expression. "What do you think of that, Admiral? Rather outside his usual modus operandi, isn't it?"

Piett looked at his boots again. Redemption, he supposed, was the word for what had left Vader so altered after Endor – but redemption required remorse, and all the guilt and grief that came with it. He wouldn't be in Vader's boots for the galaxy. "I think that for a father to live with the knowledge of having hurt his own child as much as he has hurt you must be a worse punishment than anyone else could lay on him."

She stared for a moment, before laughing again and turning back toward the flickering incense. "As flattering as that would be, there are plenty of indifferent fathers in this universe."

"Indifferent?" He shook his head. "Your Highness, I watched him do everything short of spin the galaxy backwards with his bare hands to find your brother. If he'd known, he'd have done the same for you. That much I know."

She closed her eyes, but the tears sliced free anyway, down over jaw muscles clenched in a rictus of pain, and Piett felt her need to be alone again. He had said as much as he could say, anyway. "I won't disturb you any longer," he murmured.

At the hatch, though, he paused for one last glance, and saw her hold the match to the flame of an incense taper until it relit.

TBC

Chapter 6

"I don't," huffed Piett, "see why it has to be *me*."

"Are you suggesting it should be Father?"

"Gods no. Why not Venka?"

Piett stuck a thumb at the captain, who cast a reproachful look at him over his nerfsteak. While their situation vis-à-vis what (for lack of a better term) Piett was forced to call the legitimate galactic government remained dicey, Skywalker had finagled the father-in-law of one of his two hundred students into running them regular shipments of surplus military rations. Since said rations were always less than five years old, Piett had chosen to overlook the fact that they always arrived in a *red* Star Destroyer (one glimpse of which travesty had sent Vader into his hyperbaric chamber for forty-nine straight hours).

"He doesn't have the diplomatic experience you do." Skywalker salted his thola beans serenely. "No offense intended, Captain."

Venka made a noise indicating that he would never dream of taking offense at anyone related to Darth Vader.

"I have experience in not stepping on your father's toes," Piett growled. "That's not the same thing."

"Hmm." Skywalker studied the ceiling. "You're right, politicians are a lot touchier."

Piett glared at him, and Venka too – the captain's fit of coughing couldn't be coincidental.

It had been almost two standard months since the *Executor*'s now-legendary arrival at Eriadu, and what a two months they had been for opinion columnists, paparazzi, holojournalists, political pundits – not to mention the Legislative Broadcast Channel, which citizens had actually begun to watch for reasons other than needing to be bored to sleep. Piett had reviewed some of the deliberations that had taken place in the Princess' absence, and he had to admit all the shouting and panicking and posturing had made quite exciting viewing, especially since the Senators allowed so few facts to interfere with their proceedings. Borsk Fey'lya, the Bothan leader of the Opposition, had championed the Blast-Them-To-Fragments faction; others called for Vader's arrest and trial; still others for re-banishing the entire ship; and the Senator from Dorduruaa had solemnly suggested euthanizing them all, hiring a taxidermist, and transforming the ship into a traveling museum exhibit. New Republic naval officers itching to hold surprise live-fire exercises in Eriadu had raised all manner of hell over Skywalker's unilateral decision to install himself on the *Executor* as a human shield, unaware that the only person more displeased with this arrangement than they were was Vader himself. The embassy from the Imperial Remnant had lodged seventeen protests, and the major galactic news networks aired footage of riots and demonstrations across the galaxy as a routine hourly segment.

The Princess, when she finally addressed the Senate on this wild turn of events, had dropped the galaxy's jaws even further by announcing that – however little she or the Senate might currently like it – it had ratified the Bastion Accords between the New Republic and the Galactic Empire. Consequently, since they had been active-duty naval Imperial naval personnel at the time, not only the crew of the *Executor* but Lord Vader himself were protected from prosecution by the New

Republic for any actions prior to the ratification. As Chief of State she was bound to uphold the law, the integrity of the Republic must not be sacrificed to a desire for vengeance, et cetera, and so on.

Twelve million lawsuits were filed across the galaxy before she had even finished speaking, and the case rocketed to the Supreme Court of the New Galactic Republic before the week was out – only for the justices to determine that not only was the Chief of State's interpretation perfectly correct, but that the Accords also granted every man-jack aboard the *Executor* the option to void his Imperial citizenship and become a voting citizen of the Republic if he wanted, Darth Vader not excluded. Whereupon a second tsunami of lawsuits crashed into the courts, asserting that the Bastion Accords were invalidated by the fact that the representatives of the Galactic Empire had acted without the imprimatur of the Galactic Empire's rightful ruler – namely, Lord Vader. The Supreme Court cleared its throat uncomfortably and referred the question of the Imperial succession to the Imperial Remnant, which dithered for weeks over whether it was more frightened of acknowledging Vader or denying him.

Out of patience with both sides, Vader had dragged a few petrified reporters onto the *Executor* and resolved the crisis in five minutes with three consecutive press releases: the first declaring himself Emperor retroactively since the Battle of Endor, the second stating his acceptance of the Bastion Accords as enacted, and the third announcing his abdication, effective immediately. The Imperial Remnant heaved a sigh of relief, the Supreme Court dismissed the case, and the Senate found itself with no recourse but to protest the "Imperial invasion of the Eriadu system". While Skywalker was sabotaging Vader's holocom unit to prevent him from calling the reporters back and threatening to demonstrate what an real invasion of Eriadu would look like, the Princess busied herself with soothing the Senate's ruffled feathers, promising to personally redress the matter with "appropriate Imperial representatives" right away.

By the time it was discovered that this phrase meant *Admiral Firmus Piett*, it was too late for either him or the Senate to object.

And as if the prospect of what was sure to be his brief and star-crossed career in diplomacy wasn't enough to make him sick to his stomach, there was Skywalker's plan for getting him to Coruscant.

"And I don't see why I can't take my own shuttle," Piett continued testily, impaling a hapless pile of peas on his fork.

"Because if the media gets a whiff of a lambda shuttle broadcasting the *Executor*'s transponder code, they'll make a swarm of starved piranha beetles look civilized," said Skywalker.

He reached for the salt as he spoke, without looking, but an instant later he put the shaker down and left his fingers next to it, waiting. A moment later, the oblivious Venka looked up from his plate and said, "Could I trouble you to pass the salt, Master Skywalker?"

"Certainly."

Piett wondered if it was exhausting, always reining in that sixth sense so as not to alarm the Venkas of the universe. Vader had never bothered. But then Vader had also never done anything as commonplace as joining his officers for dinner.

"An admiral ought to travel on his own military transport," he said stubbornly. "Sneaking into the capital system on an unmarked personal transport like some kind of criminal, it's disgraceful."

Skywalker shrugged. Did he even know there *was* any other way to arrive peacefully in a system? "A means to an end, Admiral. Besides, if someone decides to take a shot at you en route, you'll

want a quality pilot at the helm."

"I have several very talented pilots on my crew roster," Piett groused. "They received some of the best training the Empire had to offer."

"Yes," said Skywalker, "but my wife received the *very* best."

PIett pursed his lips in a tight, worried line. Mara Jade Skywalker's impeccable education had covered lots more subjects than starcraft operation. He was not particularly thrilled about the prospect of spending seventy-two hours in hyperspace aboard a cramped yacht with a woman who could probably murder him a different way every thirty minutes without getting past Aurek in the Assassin's Encyclopedia.

"Besides," Skywalker added, "she's looking forward to it."

"Oh, I don't doubt it," Piett muttered.

After dinner he went off to the bridge. Preyed on by the awareness that it was the last time he'd set foot on his bridge for weeks, he dragged up every section chief one by one for debriefing, then pursued them back to the ops pits and harrowed the lieutenants and ensigns, checking all the statuses and reports and watch schedules for the fifteenth time in fear of overlooking some vitally important detail without which the whole ship would disintegrate in his absence.

The fact that everybody appeared totally in command of their responsibilities provoked him to no end.

A quarter-hour or so before the watch changed over, Vader made his appearance, giving the crew a cursory glance before taking up his preferred brooding spot at the viewports. Piett left off grilling Ensign Chimmel about the coms logs and joined him, folding his hands behind his back.

"Admiral. You are prepared for your departure tomorrow?"

"As prepared as I can be, sir. Diplomacy isn't my forte, but I'll do my best."

"I have no doubt you will do well," Vader said. Piett blinked in surprise at the stars.

"Thank you, my lord. I'll report as often as opportunity affords, of course. Is there anything else you require of me before I leave the ship?"

Leave the ship. He was actually going to do that, leave his commander and his men and the Lady behind him for the first time in twenty-eight years. It was downright indecent. He plucked unhappily at the cuff of his jacket.

Vader eyed him with disgust. "Incredible as it may seem, I am capable of commanding a ship without you, Admiral."

"Of course, my lord," Piett said reflexively. They watched the stars for a moment or two. "For two whole weeks?"

Slowly, Vader's helmet rotated towards him. There followed a very long silence, during which Vader presumably debated what form of execution best answered to the occasion while Piett studied his final words with the morbid fascination of a coroner inspecting a fatal chest wound on a corpse.

This, he decided, *is what comes of consorting with Rebels.*

Well, he'd had a good long run. What did it come to? Twenty-eight years, four months, and…ah yes, thirteen days. At least he'd have the consolation of knowing he'd set a record no one would ever equal –

"Perhaps even as much as three," said Vader.

Piett waited. He waited for what seemed an age but which, according to the chrono on the bulkhead, was about fifteen seconds. Vader went back to surveying the stars. With macro-evolutionary leisure, the thought crawled into Piett's forebrain that he was not going to die at this moment in time.

He had cracked a joke at Darth Vader *and survived it*.

The sentence sounded so preposterous that he swallowed a few times and breathed experimentally through both nose and mouth, in case Vader *had* begun to throttle him and he'd just failed to notice.

"Well, my lord," he got out finally, "I suppose it's not as though I'm leaving you entirely to your own devices. No doubt your son will keep you occupied."

Vader shifted. "He will be departing with you and his wife."

Piett cleared his throat. "Indeed, my lord? My impression from him earlier was that he intended to stay."

Vader crossed his arms with the attitude of a man prepared to stare down the stars until Doomsday. "His intentions are irrelevant. He *will* be departing."

Ah. One of *those* arguments again: Vader ordering Skywalker off the premises, Skywalker retorting that he wasn't going anywhere, Vader resorting to some variation of *I am your father,* Skywalker countering with an improvisation on the theme of *you can't tell me what to do*, Vader making a nasty jab at the apocryphal Kenobi's supposedly pernicious influence, Skywalker retaliating with yet another cryptic Jedi proverb, until it was a marvel the poor old Lady didn't blow her hull plating out under the stress. The show ran performances about three or four times a week, and always concluded with Vader meditating (definitely not pouting) in his hyperbaric chamber and Skywalker tinkering (definitely not hiding) in the hangar bay until their respective tempers cooled to something less reminiscent of molten durasteel.

There was, of course, going to be a flaming row in the hangar tomorrow, and Vader was going to be beside himself when he lost it. *At least I'll be out of the system by then.* "As you say, my lord. I expect his wife will be pleased to have him back."

Vader spun on his heel and stalked off the bridge, no doubt to go meditate on which precise sin had doomed him to having reformed smugglers and assassins for children-in-law.

It took Piett barely five minutes' acquaintance with Mara Jade Skywalker to see why Vader had been so stunned by his son's bombshell announcement.

He arrived at the hangar some ten minutes after she landed and found her octopused around her husband at the bottom of the ramp, apparently having spent all of those ten minutes with her mouth suction-clamped to his. He couldn't make out much besides a lot of black leather, a badly mussed-

up blaze of titian hair, and the words, "Kreth it, Farm Boy, tell Daddy Dearest we don't need a chaperone."

Skywalker laughed and set her down, turning to Piett with no signs of embarrassment whatsoever. "Admiral, I'd like you to meet my wife, Mara. Mara, this is – "

"Admiral Firmus W. Piett, of Axxila, age 68, son of Tellus and Magna Piett, older brother to Carilla, formerly of the Axxilan antipirate forces, handpicked by Lord Vader as keelplate captain of the *Executor,* promoted to admiral upon the expiration of Kendal Ozzel during the Battle of Hoth." She raised an eyebrow at her husband. "Farm Boy here likes to forget I had a life before he showed up."

Piett coughed. "He did give me to understand you had been an Imperial operative, ma'am."

Mara elbowed Skywalker in the ribs. "Ma'am, you hear that? Take notes, Farm Boy."

"Sorry, we Outer Rim hicks and Rebel scum don't go in for formality," Skywalker said. But he kissed her hair gallantly.

"Nice try, Master Jedi, but don't think you're off the hook yet. I have a *very* long to-do list that's been piling up." She insinuated herself under his arm, walked a pair of fingers up his chest, and tapped him on the lips. "Lots of physical labor."

Piett stared at Skywalker's open, earnest face and no-nonsense workaday clothes; then at his wife's exotic green eyes, chiseled cheekbones, and vacuum-sealed patent leather; and wondered if a less likely looking couple had ever been spotted at an altar.

Apart from Skywalker's own parents, of course.

Mara's gaze flashed to Piett; for an instant he feared she had heard his thoughts. "I'm so sorry, Admiral. We must be making you uncomfortable."

Her eyes were dancing devilishly. She wasn't sorry in the slightest.

"Not at all, ma'am," he said doggedly. "It's an honor to meet you. Your husband would seem to be a very lucky man."

"There's no such thing as luck," said Skywalker, tucking her against his side.

"Oh, really?" she purred. "Because I think you're pretty damn lucky I didn't kill you twenty years ago."

"Ha. One look at these baby-blue eyes and you were over the moons of Iego."

She jabbed an index finger into his pectorals. "Watch it, Farm Boy. I can still off you some night in your sleep."

"But my love," he grinned, "just think how much you'd miss me."

"I'll cope. There's always Lando."

"Ouch." He clutched at his heart. "You know what, just for that, I'm staying here."

"You do that. Far be it from me to interrupt your vacation with Daddy Dearest." She softened the words with another kiss, then made a face at his shirt. "You've been wearing this thing since you got here, haven't you?" She darted a look at Piett. "Hasn't he?"

"Er," said Piett, who had not previously noticed. Detergent had run out something like a decade ago.

Mara narrowed her eyes at Skywalker. "I knew it. Seriously, you couldn't have taken three minutes before you left to grab a change of clothes?"

"My love, I married you so I wouldn't have to worry about these things."

She smacked him. "If you wanted a housewife you picked the wrong woman, Farm Boy."

"Ah. So you *didn't* bring me a bag?"

She glared at him. "It's in the cabin."

"That's my girl." He grinned and started up the ramp.

"Do us all a favor and put on something that's been washed this month!" He made her a melodramatic bow. She blew him a kiss. Piett cut his gaze to the ceiling. Were Skywalkers born with a genetic compulsion to make a spectacle of themselves?

Probably.

But the moment the object of Mara's affections was out of sight, her coquettishness vanished too. The ruthlessly analytical quality now occupying her piercing green eyes was what he imagined Vader's regard might be like, if the mask were removed. He suddenly had no difficulty at all picturing her in the role of the Emperor's Hand.

"So," she said. "Twenty-five years straight and the man in black hasn't throttled you yet. He really has gone to the nerfs, hasn't he?"

She's way out of your depth, Piett told himself. *Vader doesn't need you to defend him,* he told himself. So of course the next words out of his mouth were, "Lord Vader remains the same capable and efficient commander he has always been."

"You really think so, don't you?"

He drew himself up indignantly. "I wouldn't have said it if I didn't, ma'am."

She laughed. "Don't push the faithful companion act too far, Admiral, I know better than that." She hooked a thumb in her pocket and wandered away from the ship, taking in the bay. "I have to say… it's kind of nice to be back aboard the Lady again." She favored him with a smile. "There may be other Super Star Destroyers, but she's the grandest old dame of the bunch."

Well, at least she had good taste in ships; more than could be said for Solo. Piett beamed. "She's a bit the worse for wear, ma'am, but I wouldn't trade her for the galaxy. When were you last aboard her?"

"Three months before Endor, if memory serves." She turned in a circle. Her fingers played idly along the hilt of her lightsaber. "Turn and burn en route to an undercover op on Calathron."

"I expect life has changed a great deal for you since the war," Piett ventured.

"Oh, you'd be amazed how exciting life with Farm Boy can be."

"I think I have some idea," he said dryly. "The fruit doesn't fall *that* far from the juja tree."

She glanced at him with a smile that had about the same effect on him as a mysterious ripple in a lake – possibly an innocent fluke of the wind, but possibly a ravenous sando aqua monster. "Yes, but the fruit's so much more...enjoyable than the juja tree. Wouldn't you agree, Father mine?"

Piett abruptly registered the rasp of the respirator behind him, and half turned. Vader stood several paces away, just beyond the lift, thumbs hooked in his belt and fingers hovering near his lightsaber. "Jade," he growled.

"Ah-ah. Jade Skywalker."

"As you wish."

"Oh, Farm Boy had some say in it too." She gave him a frank once-over, head to toe.

Piett could practically hear Vader's blood boil at the term *Farm Boy*. Thank the goddess Skywalker chose that moment to re-emerge from the ship, decked out in a fresh shirt as ordered, with a duffel slung over his shoulder. "You keep saying *Farm Boy* like it's some kind of insult." He kissed her yet again. "Father, wife. Wife, Father."

"I've known him longer than you have, you know," Mara said dryly.

"Which is why I'm staying here to catch up."

"You," Vader thundered at him, "are departing on that ship imminently."

Skywalker cast a longsuffering look at the ceiling. "I told you, Father. I'm not leaving."

"And *I* have tolerated your reckless insubordination long enough. Your presence aboard this ship is neither required nor desired. *Leave.*"

Skywalker's monumental patience had hit its limit. He inhaled sharply. "You – "

"Well, that's a plot twist," said Mara loudly. "I seem to recall something about a two-billion-credit alive-only reward, no disintegrations, twelve-Destroyer search squadrons, mass bounty hunter hirings, and the Grade 5 max-security block kept clear twenty-four-seven with a damn mint on the pillow all ready for him." She turned to Piett. "Am I remembering all that right?"

Skywalker laughed under his breath, but Vader whipped towards her with the anger-propelled speed of yore. "You would do well to remember some respect, Emperor's Hand."

"Oh, I can remember *lots* of things." Out swam another of her ripple-on-the-water smiles. "Sure you want to go down that road?"

Skywalker kneaded the bridge of his nose. "Mara, maybe you should give us a minute to sort this out."

She chucked him gently under the chin. "I have a better idea. How about you hop back aboard and give Ben a call quick? You'll make his day."

He frowned immediately between wife and father. "I don't think – "

"Don't think, good plan. In the best traditions of the Skywalker name. I like it. Shoo."

Skywalker studied her another moment, then heaved a sigh. "Alright. Five minutes. Call if you need me."

With a pointed *we're-not-done-here-and-don't-you-dare-mistreat-my-wife* look at his father, he tossed his duffel bag towards the lift and went back up the ramp, leaving Mara faced off with Vader. It shouldn't have looked anything like a fair fight, but that smile of hers…yes, this was an excellent time for one Firmus W. Piett to go be very obviously absorbed in checking his luggage.

"Let's you and me get one thing straight. Farm Boy's got it in his head that it's his job to run interference between you and the rest of the universe, and in case you missed it, he's taking a hell of a lot of friendly fire to do it. Let's face it,you've got exactly one actual friend in the entire galaxy." Piett looked up, saw her chin jerk in his direction, and threw the suitcase lid up to hide behind. "Which is why he's not going to get any more flak from you, starting now."

"Watch where you tread, Emperor's Hand." The words struck out like a whetting stone putting an edge on a dagger. "I will not harm my son, but you are another matter entirely."

Piett's heart leapt into his mouth. He hadn't heard that particular brand of possessive malice from Vader since their Skywalker-hunting days. Instantly he realized that the Dark Lord's scathing threats against Solo had been made *pro forma.* Solo merely irritated him – Mara Jade he considered a threat. Between Vader and his son lay sacred ground that he allowed nobody to violate and live, be he Emperor of the whole krething galaxy; and Mara had planted her flag right in the heart of it. Wife of his son, mother of his grandchild – Piett wasn't sure either status would protect her if the scale tipped even a hair too far.

Her smile hardened, and Piett saw an angry tic in the corner of her mouth. She knew the ice was thin – and she was marching out on it anyway. "*You* won't harm him? You have a toll-free hyperlane right into his heart, and the first chance you got you flew a Death Star into it and lit him up like Alderaan. He still wakes up with a Bespin nightmare now and then. He went through hell for you at Endor, he's *kept* going through hell for two decades because he admits to being your son, and now that you've finally decided to grace us all with your presence again, you're giving him *more* hell for sticking up for your undeserving butt against his actual friends. Around here we call that harming someone. You're not doing any more damage on my watch."

Whoever had taught Mara Jade Skywalker the art of verbally eviscerating a man had been a master. At the word *Bespin* Vader jerked back as though he'd been struck across the face. Piett had stopped pretending to rummage through his case. He didn't even dare to breathe. Silence stretched, taut as a bowstring.

"What do you want from me?" Vader finally asked. "What is done is done."

Mara's aggressive posture relaxed a notch. "A truce. I don't like you particularly, I never have, but Luke's more important to both of us. So hate my guts from here to Tatooine if you want, but as far as Farm Boy's concerned, I love you, you love me, bygones are bygones, blasters are buried, and so forth."

Vader crossed his arms. "And is that all?"

"One more thing," she said softly. "You don't ever, *ever,* tell him to leave you again. You mean the galaxy to him. Let him have his father for a change."

She held out her hand. "Deal?"

Vader continued to impersonate a monolith for another few seconds. Then he abruptly reached past her outstretched hand and lifted her chin gently with thumb and forefinger. "I was hasty in my judgment. He did well to choose you."

A blush nearly the same flaming shade as her hair suddenly ran into Mrs. Hardbitten Imperial Operative's cheeks. Piett ducked behind his suitcase to conceal a kilometer-wide grin. So even the unflappable Emperor's Hand was not quite immune to Vader's caprices. Perhaps the next seventy-two hours wouldn't be as trying as he'd feared.

"And our deal?" she demanded.

Vader dropped his hand. "I will do as you ask."

"And what exactly would that be?" Skywalker's voice cut in. He had stopped halfway down the boarding ramp, bestowing suspicious looks equally on his wife and his father.

"Nothing to fret about, dear," said Mara. "I just figured this was my best chance to get my lightsaber autographed by the artist himself."

Vader glanced down at the battered old hilt on her hip and gave a definite start. "Where did you get that?"

"Present from Farm Boy. And no, you can't have it back." She tossed her hair. "Finders keepers."

Vader hesitated for a breath or two, then turned to Skywalker. "I…assumed you had lost it on Bespin."

"I got it back," said Skywalker quietly.

"How?"

He shrugged. "Long story."

There was another strained silence. Piett found himself holding his breath again.

Vader reached out and laid a hand on his son's shoulder. "Then you must stay," he said, "and tell it to me."

Skywalker's eyebrows shot up. "Stay?"

Vader glanced at Mara, wryly (Piett couldn't for the life of him have said how he knew it was wryly). "Provided your wife can spare you."

His daughter-in-law favored him with a glowing smile. "Dear me. I suppose I'll survive somehow."

The Lady looked very small and fragile from the cockpit of the yacht. Piett watched her dwindle from a ship, to a splinter, to a speck, to an indistinguishable patch of space – then the stars lurched and Eriadu was millions of klicks behind him. Mara settled back, checking gauges and readouts out of habit, her eyes distant; perhaps her thoughts too lingered behind them. He sank down in his bucket seat, watching the dervishes of liquid lightning outside and trying not to feel like a bereaved parent. He'd been the buffer for so long between Vader and the rest of the crew, and without him to interface, gloss over the rough patches, who knew what might happen…

Then he thought again of Skywalker in the hangar bay, as openly delighted as any four-year-old could be over the simple fact of his father letting him stay. He smiled.

Mara turned to him, and he could see at once that she'd been thinking of the same thing. She smiled – no dangerous ripples this time, just simple pleasure at having seen someone dear to her made happy. "Don't worry, Admiral," she murmured. "I think they're going to do just fine without us."

Piett nodded amiably. "I believe you're right, ma'am."

TBC

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: everything I know about astrophysics I invented.

The ramp dropped, and Piett trotted down it to discover that the planet formerly known as Imperial Center had miraculously contrived to become an even greater smog-filled racket than before.

The pinnacles of the capitol district glimmered above him in every direction, almost seeming to blink with astonishment at the sight of an Imperial Navy uniform after all these years. Traffic whined and snarled through every spare meter of sky, and directly overhead flags snapped on the spires of what had been Imperial Palace. He had vivid memories of watching on holovid the day those flags were first run up, back when he'd been an embryo of an officer and still young enough to cheer the spectacle madly in the streets with practically the entire population of Axxila. He was a great deal older and soberer now; the shine had worn off many things that had seemed so splendid back then, himself included.

All the same, it gave him a pang to see those flags flaming the rebel-red of the New Republic.

"Admiral Piett?" someone said, and Piett realized belatedly that a small welcoming party had approached from the far side of the platform. The Princess was conspicuously absent. In her stead were a handful of military types in dress whites, a Bothan senator, a phalanx of security guards, and a man somewhat older than himself in conservatively cut diplomatic robes, who was extending his hand.

"I am Mokka Falanthas, Minister of State. On behalf of Chief of State Organa Solo and the New Republic, welcome to Coruscant."

He had prepared himself to hear *Coruscant* instead of *Imperial Center*, and though the change stung could shake the man's hand without showing it. "Thank you, Minister. I'm glad to be here." Gods, he hadn't been a diplomat for five minutes and he was already lying through his teeth.

The Minister gestured to the Bothan. "May I introduce Senator Borsk Fey'lya, Senate Minority Leader."

Fey'lya made a grudging gesture. According to Piett's brief, the Bothan was an ambitious sort who had built a career out of being Leia Organa's antithesis; he currently looked as though he couldn't decide whether to maintain his outrage at the Chief of State's indecently kind treatment of the Empire's orphans, or congratulate himself on securing a spot in such an extraordinary welcoming party. "Senator, a pleasure."

Fey'lya was instantly elbowed aside by a general, who pumped Piett's hand with all the glee of a Hutt surveying an eelfrog buffet. "General Airen Cracken, New Republic Intelligence."

Piett had an awful feeling he was going to be seeing a lot of Airen Cracken whether he wanted to or not. "General."

"And this is Supreme Commander Ackbar of the New Republic Defense Forces…"

Piett shook the aged Mon Calamarian's clammy fin and continued through the obligatory courtesies. *If only the Emperor could see me now*, he thought. *Shaking hands with aliens, ex-slaves, insurrectionists, and senators right smack dab on his doorstep.*

He glanced over his shoulder as Mara emerged from the ship and was sucked directly into conversation with Airen Cracken. *Ah yes, and Jedi turncoats too. Mustn't forget the worst blasphemy of them all.*

"You must be weary after your long travels, Admiral," said the Minister presently. "Chief of State Organa Solo requested that we provide a suite for you here, if that will be convenient?" He gestured at the glorious spires of the palace, where the red flags frolicked their victory dance.

Piett forced a cheerful smile. "I should be glad of it."

"Excellent, excellent." The Minister began leading the way inside. "We'll give you some time to make yourself at home, but Her Excellency would be most gratified if you would join her this evening for a state dinner welcoming you to Galactic City."

He gritted his teeth. "That's very kind of her. I would be honored."

Stars, it was going to be a miserable two weeks.

Dinner was conducted on such a scale as to make Piett exceedingly grateful he could still fit into his mess-dress uniform. There was the Chief of State, all grace and poise. There were Senators; there were admirals; there were potentates of every province and scions of every species. There was even the astonishing spectacle of Han Solo in pressed trousers without a single engine lube stain on them.

What there was not, at least for Firmus Piett, was any actual eating. He cast regretful glances at the tantalizing plates that paraded, untouched, beneath his nose, for all these dignitaries (excepting only Solo's trousers) spent the entire evening competing for a piece of his conversation. It was flattering, he supposed, but such hobnobbing and shoulder-rubbing was lightyears outside his realm of expertise. By the time the Chief of State retired for the evening, he felt depressingly certain that the only thing he'd managed to get into his mouth all night had been his foot.

He'd found a nice quiet corner to catch his breath in when a hand tapped him on the shoulder behind. He whirled, reaching for the sidearm he'd left in the Lady's bridge armory, and found himself staring into a pair of green eyes reminiscent of a Hyraxian panther's.

"Hungry?" Mara asked.

"Gods, yes," said Piett.

With a casual nod inviting him to follow, she led the way around the corner, through a couple of curtains, down a quiet corridor—then suddenly leaned her palm into a decoration on one of the carved walls, at which a whole panel of it slid away. "Let's take the shortcut, shall we?"

"Do I want to know why there is an entire rat's nest of secret passages in the diplomatic guest

suites?" Piett hissed behind her as they proceeded down a series of shadowy, narrow tunnels. He had to walk sideways down half of them.

"I'll leave it to your imagination," said the Emperor's ex-assassin.

They came out somewhere in the residential levels of an older part of the Palace, probably constructed in the days of the old Republic; instead of ponderous marble or glimstone, the walls were paneled in Orinthian cedar and intricate ivory inlay, and splendid rugs hushed every step. Piett was almost surprised when he noticed that several of the decorative bosses in the walls concealed sensor eyes.

"Bioscanners," said Mara. "If you'd tried to come down this corridor without proper clearances you'd have a knife through your throat now."

Piett swallowed and cast a nervous glance all around. "I don't see any security personnel."

Mara smiled. "They're very good at not being seen. Most of them," she added, and the next moment they rounded a corner and Piett found himself face to face (or rather navel to face) with a pair of small gray aliens in hoods keeping watch over a doorway. His initial impression was of Jawas, but one glimpse of their grim, fang-riddled countenances put that thought out of his head. "Mara clan Skywalker," one of them rasped, and keyed the door for them. Piett spotted a knife hilt up the bodyguard's sleeve and hastened past, sighing in relief as the door whirred shut behind him.

"…navigation I can help, but if it's astrophysics you're gonna have to ask Chewie—" Solo, standing by a complicated credenza with drink in hand and formal jacket swung over a shoulder, cut short his comments as he spotted them and made an expansive gesture. "Come on in. Care for a stiff one, either of you?"

"Fill me up." Mara shrugged her jacket off.

"Thank you," said Piett, one intimidated eye on her chiseled upper arms, "I—"

"Me too, Dad!" A tousled brown head of hair popped up over a high-backed sofa in the adjacent sitting room.

"Sorry, Junior," Solo said loudly, pouring a small shot glass and holding it out towards the delighted expression across the room, "your mom'd kill me." The boy flung a hand out over the sofa back, and the shot glass scooted through the air into it. Solo winked at Piett. Mara rolled her eyes. "Maybe when you're old enough!"

"Exactly how stupid do you two think I am?" came the Princess' voice from somewhere down a hall. The boy hastily ducked back out of view with his ill-gotten goods before she appeared a moment later, formal grandeur exchanged for a blouse and a loose robe, adjusting an earring as she walked. "Admiral. I daresay you could use something to eat?"

"I certainly could," he said. "I didn't realize there was so little dining at a state dinner."

"Leave it to a bunch of politicians to invite you to supper and not let you eat," groused Solo. "In case we needed any more proof that they all need dedicated six-man navigation crews just to find their own ass—"

The Princess cleared her throat, with a pointed look at the tuft of hair visible above the sofa.

"—teroids," Solo added clumsily.

"*Asteroids*, Dad?" said the tuft of hair. "Seriously?"

"Yes, *Dad*, seriously?" said the Princess. She turned to Piett and nodded him towards the sitting room. "I'll get something together for us. Please make yourself at home."

Solo followed her into the kitchen, while Jade headed down a hall saying something about calling to make sure the babysitters had remembered to put her son to bed, ruffling the tuft of hair on her way. Piett rounded the sofa in search of the most appropriate seat for an Imperial admiral paying a casual evening visit to a Rebel ringleader's private residence. The sofa itself was out of the question, being a morass of datapads, textbooks, flimsy, lightpens, calculators, and one teenage boy hunched cross-legged over the lot. Piett noted the half-empty shot glass squirreled away in the crease of his knee. The youngster glanced up. "Hi. Are you Admiral Piett?"

"I am. You must be…Jacen?"

"Anakin."

Not the blackmailer, then. He watched Piett with bright blue eyes much like his uncle's, currently exhibiting an intense and somewhat nervous fascination that was explained by his next comment. "You know my grandfather, don't you?"

"Yes," said Piett, wondering how slowly the Princess was likely to kill him if he waxed eloquent on this particular topic. "Perhaps you'll meet him soon yourself."

"I don't know. I don't think him and Mom get along too well."

Understatement of the millennium, thought Piett.

"Like Hutts and charity drives, kid," said Solo as he arrived with Piett's drink. "You're her favorite Anakin by twelve parsecs." Anakin extracted the shot glass from behind his knee with a cajoling expression, and Solo topped it off out of his own tumbler, raising a warning eyebrow at Piett. Anakin grinned, then drank it in a rush as the Princess' voice rose from the kitchen.

"*Han!"*

"Her favorite Anakin?" asked Piett as Solo scrambled away.

"That's Grandfather's name too," said Anakin. "Or it was, when he was a Jedi. Anakin Skywalker. You didn't know?"

"No…I didn't." Piett sank slowly into a trim striped armchair. Thirty years he had known and feared the man, and only now learned who he was. A Jedi named Anakin Skywalker…it rang dim boyhood bells. He was sure that name had been mentioned by the war correspondents back during the Clone Wars. A burning urge seized him to run Holonet searches when he got back to his suite —to see, if he could, the real human being who'd been mummified within the mask and legend of Darth Vader.

He filed the thoughts away for later. Whatever the original Anakin's social shortcomings, the second edition seemed to be a perfectly amiable young fellow so far. "What are you working on?" he asked.

"Astrophysics lab," said Anakin, making a face. "It's taking forever and a millennium."

The Princess reappeared, a plate of cheese in one hand and a glass of green champagne in the other. "Anakin, the sofa is not your desk. And I'll take that, thank you." She put down the plate and held

out her hand for the shot glass.

"Aw, come on, Mom! I'm sixteen practically!"

"The legal drinking age for humanoids is *eighteen*, young man."

"On Corellia it's sixteen!"

"One more reason we don't live on Corellia."

"Hey!" came Solo's patriotic protest from the kitchen.

"Coruscant sucks," Anakin groused, surrendering the contraband.

"My heart bleeds for you. Now clear that up so the rest of us can sit down."

He started shoveling his homework together, muttering under his breath. Piett had a taste of his drink—then heaved a long, satisfied sigh. Free of that rotgut starshine at last.

"This," he said with feeling, "is excellent, Your Highness."

"Leia, please. We don't stand on ceremony at home. And I can't take credit for it, Han's the liquor expert of the household." She toed off her shoes and curled up on the sofa as Solo sat down next to her and slid an arm over her shoulders.

"And a most welcoming and peaceful household it is." A compliment never hurt.

"There's something we don't hear every day, eh, Your Highnessness?" said Solo. "Amazing what a difference it makes having the Twin Terrors on the other side of the city. Now if we could just get rid of the last one…"

"Ha ha, Dad, real funny." Anakin had relocated to a corner of the carpet and now a sea of flimsy ebbed in and out around him as he scrawled on a series of datapads with one hand, playing a concerto on his calculator with the other.

"I take it Jacen and Jaina are out for the evening?" Piett inquired, to be polite.

Solo nodded at the hall where Mara had disappeared. "They're babysitting the Skycrawler."

"Both of them?"

"Four hands to one Force-sensitive toddler is a pretty conservative ratio," said the Princess. "Trust me on—"

"*Sithspit!"* The adults turned to see Anakin throw his stylus down and dump his head in his hands. "I don't care what Uncle Luke says, this is one hundred percent impossible!"

"What is?" asked the Princess.

"This stupid assignment! We have to calculate a five-stage hyper jump from scratch. Like, coordinating tables and star charts and mass inertia formulas and everything *by hand*." He threw himself backwards against a side table. "I mean, why in the nine hells do they think we invented navicomputers?"

"Language," said the Princess sternly. "It's a grade, not the fate of the galaxy."

"Sorry," Anakin muttered. "It's just so pointless. I am literally *never* gonna have to do this."

"I wouldn't be so sure," Piett cut in, reaching for the cheese. "On the *Executor* we had to calculate jumps from scratch for about twenty-three years before we got our navicomputers repaired."

Anakin's eyes shot wide open in astonishment. "You did?"

He nodded. "And we had to build our own star charts and coordinate system first."

"Holy *shavit*," Anakin breathed, earning yet another Look from his mother, and doubtless a reprimand too if something had not chimed from the kitchen.

"There's the rest of it ready," she said.

Solo went with her, leaning down to murmur something in her ear. Anakin's gaze tracked them for a moment, then crept sideways to Piett.

"Would you mind if I ask a question? OK, more like ten questions probably, cause I seriously don't know what I'm doing and the last time I tried to solve it I killed my ship like five times."

Now *this* was his kind of diplomacy. "Certainly. Let's have a look."

Anakin shoved the cheese platter aside and hoisted his ocean of homework onto the coffee table. "See, I'm supposed to start out at Arkania, jump to the Perlemian Trade Route at Ralltiir and follow that to Brentaal, and then take the Corellian Run to Corellia and backtrack to Colomus. But I keep overshooting Brentaal and then I get powzered in the Deep Core."

Piett raised an eyebrow. "Powzered?"

"You know, bloomed. Dusted. Totally Death Starred." He mimicked an explosion with both hands.

Piett's face was no longer capable of producing a confused expression, because *confused* looked too much like *stupid* and Being Stupid was extremely high on the list of Qualities Darth Vader Does Not Appreciate In A Military Officer (outranked only by: High Treason, Making Excuses For Failure, and Playing Political Games). So he nodded crisply and returned to the problem at hand. "Your ship's mass distribution figures and hyperdrive specifications?"

Anakin handed over one of his datapads. Piett flicked a practiced eye over it and sifted through some flimsy for the printouts with the hyperlane astrophysical data for the Coreward end of the Perlemian Trade Route. Once upon a rosy time such an undertaking would have been as foreign to him as it was to Anakin; now he could estimate the complex formulas at a glance. He had not expected this particular skill to be useful to anyone anymore. Humming and hawing with the satisfaction of an old craftsman as he turned from the hyperlane figures to the star charts, then to Anakin's jumbled chicken-scratch sheets of calculations, he never even heard the elder Solos and Mara return to stare at the scene.

"Ah," he said at length. "Here's your difficulty." He circled a variable in one of the early equations. "You've forgotten to account for the pulse in the gravitational flux quotient exerted by Brentaal-7."

"What's Brentaal-7 have to do with anything?"

Piett shuffled the star charts and found the display of the Brentaal system. "It's currently located five degrees off its orbital equinox, which places it in gravitational pull of the outbound terminus of the hyperlane. When you hyper out, you're being towed off-course by its gravity well about 0.002 degrees. So—your last set of calculations?"

Anakin plowed through his sheets and produced the corresponding page.

"So when you don't compensate for that angle of divergence on your outward jump, you miss the hyperlane vector for the Corellian Run, which bleeds your absolute velocity and renders your vector compensation inaccurate. You end up on a straight shot to the Deep Core and then, of course, it's only a matter of time before a black hole overcomes your lightspeed momentum. And that is why, if I may borrow the phrase, you keep getting powzered."

Anakin gaped at him for fully ten seconds.

"You are a *genius*," he said. "Dad, he didn't even need a calculator!"

Piett looked up and found even Solo looking impressed. "Damn, Admiral. You really know the bantha's head from its—"

"Asteroid?" suggested the Princess.

"Tail," said Solo archly. "That's something else."

"Especially," murmured Mara, gliding by to a chair, "since his naval background is in ComScan, not navigation."

Piett tried not to look too pleased with himself. "Necessity, I have found, is the mother of education as well as invention."

"Jacen and Jaina are never going to believe this," said Anakin. "I mean…that is so rogue that you can do that!"

Carilla had used to look at him like that, ten years younger than him, always bursting with adoration for her big brother the Navy officer. He wondered for the millionth time whether she was still alive, whether she was still married, whether there had been any more children after Justus and Astria. On the bridge of a capital warship one could more easily forget things like snacking in the living room late at night, helping youngsters with their homework, everything that went into a normal family life.

"Admiral?" asked the Princess gently.

He shook himself out of his abrupt melancholy and put on a polite smile. "Forgive me, my mind was wandering. Do you think you can get a handle on that now, young man?"

"I think so," said Anakin. "Thank you!" He transshipped his swamp of homework back to the floor, still muttering under his breath, "*So* rogue…"

Piett filed away the word *rogue* next to *powzered, bloomed, dusted,* and *totally Death Starred.* Perhaps it would be useful for impressing other youngsters who crossed his path.

TBC

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

> Disclaimer—I have never watched the animated Clone Wars series, and I probably never will.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Piett peeled off his cap and ran a hand through his surviving hair, savoring the blessed silence of the library. The so-called Eriadu Summit was on its tenth interminable day, almost exclusively due to the fact that Borsk Fey'lya considered it his duty to spend a quarter of an hour bickering over each word Piett said at the table, up to and including *um*. Not even the Princess, with all her diplomatic acumen, could prevent him from having his say. In fact she frequently invited his opinion, which Piett understood was appropriate and democratic and conducive to the long-term goal of winning over the New Republic at large—but which was nonetheless vastly irritating, especially when the Bothan insisted on revising, for the fifth time in a given day, how large a charge would be permissible in the blaster cartridges of Lord Vader's six (five—make that four—no, six again)-man stormtrooper entourage when (no, *if*—very well, *when*) the Dark Lord descended on Coruscant for the final ratification.

In what Piett considered his finest diplomatic move so far, he had refrained from reminding the committee that Vader could spot them the entire entourage, his lightsaber, and a durasteel strait-jacket and still kill them all in five seconds flat.

The Princess often sent an encouraging smile his way, or lauded the progress being made, or (privately) complimented him on the way he wasn't tearing out fistfuls of Fey'lya's fur; that was about all that had kept him from throwing in the towel. Well, that and the fact that Vader had received each communication of fresh Republic demands with comparative serenity. Only two holes had been punched into the *Executor*'s bulkheads so far.

He ought to be conferring with Vader right now. The negotiations were on a two-hour recess while each side weighed the most recent proposals—the Senate committee in its cloakroom, and Piett in an elaborate antique library reserved for the use of top-ranking foreign diplomats on such occasions. But the *Executor*'s on-duty ComScan officer had informed him that Lord Vader was in his meditation chamber and had given orders not to be disturbed, which historically would have left Piett twiddling his thumbs. Nowadays he had only to hand the message off to the ship's resident Sith Whisperer, and wait an hour or so while that intrepid individual flushed Vader out of hiding and performed the mysterious alchemical process he'd discovered for transforming the Dark Lord's homicidal wrath into mild irritability.

Piett shook his head thoughtfully as he meandered around the room. Mere telepathy couldn't explain all the things Skywalker somehow understood about his impenetrable parent. For instance,

a few weeks ago he'd casually mentioned that if Piett wanted to look Vader in the eye, he should focus on the lower half of the mask's eyeplates—as if, to him, the mask were nothing but a pane of transparisteel with Anakin Skywalker's face plainly visi…ble…behind…

His feet stopped mid-stride. His gaze traveled sideways to a computer terminal and hung there, as if he were six years old and it were a forbidden cookie jar.

He shouldn't have let such an impertinent idea cross his mind, let alone dare to act on it…but Vader *was* six hundred lightyears away. Even for a mind reader, that had to be out of reach. And the library was empty. And it wasn't as if he had anything better to do at the moment…

Gingerly he sat down at the terminal and brought up the Holonet research program. He scanned the room again. Still nobody. He blew out a breath and keyed in: *Anakin Skywalker.*

After over five minutes of churning thought, the program blinked a zero-result screen. "Are you sure you meant: Anakin Skywalker?" Piett leapt half out of his skin, swore a blistering string under his breath at the computer, and muted it, shooting another furtive glance over the top of the terminal. Then he tapped out: *Annakin Skywalker.*

Still nothing. He frowned. *Anikin Skywalker?*

The zero-result graphic appeared to be mocking him. He tried *Aneken, Anoken,* and finally, out of sheer desperation, *Annican.*

The computer bleeped awake at that one. "Did you mean: Annie Can Sky Walk?"

With an especially foul oath bequeathed to him by his old drill inspector at Academy, Piett stabbed the mute key again. Not quickly enough, however; a snicker drifted from behind the shelves at his back. Swiveling round, he spotted a pair of bright brandy-brown eyes and a tell-tale lopsided grin glinting through the gaps. "Evening, Admiral. Doing a little research project?"

He relaxed a little. "Good evening, Miss Solo. Idle curiosity, I suppose." If he had to be caught by a Solo twin, then thank the Force it was Jaina, and not—

"Annie Can Sky Walk?" queried a second voice. Piett groaned inwardly and turned back. Jacen the Blackmailer was leaning over his console, head craned the better to read the display upside down. "Does Granddad know you think his name is *Annie*?"

Piett suddenly had bigger things to worry about than whether he was about to become Jacen's next source of pocket money. "*Granddad*?"

Jacen shrugged his father's elaborately nonchalant shrug. "Why not?"

Piett's subsequent silence, while he tried to decide which of the approximately fifty thousand reasons why not should be the first out of his mouth, unfortunately left the floor wide open for a change of subject.

"I can tell you now," said Jaina, coming up behind him, "you won't find anything under Anakin Skywalker."

"Yep," said Jacen. "We all tried that ages ago. No holos—"

"No news reports—"

"No census files—"

"No birth certificates—"

"No piloting licenses—"

"Not even any criminal records, if you can believe that—"

"It's almost like some big-time Imperial honcho had that name wiped from the records or something—"

"*Who* could it have *been*?" they chorused.

Piett had gotten slightly dizzy from twisting the seat back and forth trying to keep up with which twin was speaking. He kneaded his brow. "Well. I daresay in that case I'm wasting my time."

Jacen (for no reason that Piett could see) rapped out a short drum solo on the top of the console, before he swung around and deposited himself in the neighboring chair. "Nah, you just gotta know where to look."

"Search Kenobi." Jaina leaned over his shoulder.

Piett squinted at the screen. "Kenobi?"

"K-a-n-o-b-y," said Jacen.

There was a sound of someone's skull being thumped. "Ignore Bantha Brains here, Admiral. K-*e*-n-o-b-*i*."

Piett keyed the name in. "Is he this Obi-Wan character I keep hearing about?"

"Mm-hmm."

The computer hummed, sifting through the accumulated records of fifteen thousand years of galactic history, or at least through such records as had managed to survive the cataclysmic downfalls of first the Republic and then the Empire. "Who was he, exactly?"

"Granddad's smashball coach," said Jacen. There was a sound of someone's shin being kicked. "Ow!"

"If you're practicing for Granddad, you might as well quit now."

"Hey!" Jacen donned an injured look, also plagiarized from his father. "I'll have you know I'm considered a comic genius in many circles."

"Only the ones under the age of two," Jaina retorted. "Anyway, have you *seen* the history holos? He makes your girlfriend look like a Shurnian hyena, and she only smiles once every three years."

"I don't know what you're talking about," said Jacen indignantly, now channeling a spot-on impression of his mother. "I don't have a girlfriend."

"No, just the biggest crush since the Malastare Marvels beat the Corellian Comets four hundred and forty-six to two—"

Piett cleared his throat. "Fascinating, but *who* is Obi-Wan Kenobi?"

"A Jedi Knight," said Jaina. "He taught Granddad way back when. Uncle Luke too."

Piett frowned. "I was given to understand your uncle did not begin his Jedi training until after the Battle of Hoth. Kenobi was killed aboard the first Death Star years before that." One could not listen to two months' worth of altercations between Vader and Skywalker without learning a considerable amount about a) Obi-Wan Kenobi's innumerable sins and b) what Vader would have done to him on the first Death Star had he known about more of them.

"Um," said Jaina. "Well…"

"Thing is…" muttered Jacen.

They shared a look. It was a look he had seen worn by a great many ensigns and greenhorn lieutenants over the course of his career. What that look meant was: *I now realize just how stupid my explanation sounds*.

"What," Piett said severely, "is 'the thing'?"

The twins eyed each other like a pair of akk pups that had been caught peeing on the carpet. Then, in perfect unison, they sighed: "He's a ghost."

Piett spun the console around and pinned the twins with his best *do-you-think-I-got-this-rank-by-being-an-idiot* expression. "A *ghost*. You expect me to believe your uncle was educated by a *ghost*."

Shuffling ensued.

"Well," said Jacen. "Not *just* by a ghost. There was Master Yoda too. He wasn't a ghost." He eyed his sister. "Erm. At the time."

"Am I understand," said Piett, "that this Yoda is now *also* a ghost?"

Jacen's expression performed several interesting little contortions of embarrassment. "Well… apparently that's what happens to Jedi when they, um. Die."

"If that were the case, we'd be up to our necks in them here on Coruscant, wouldn't we?" He flicked his chin in the general direction of the Temple District. "When was the last time either of *you* saw Kenobi or this Yoda character?"

Jacen cleared his throat stubbornly. "Just because I haven't seen it doesn't mean it isn't true. Besides, Uncle Luke can't lie to save his life, everybody knows that."

"You might be surprised," Piett muttered. *He can certainly cheat at sabacc just fine.*

Jaina snorted. "Jasa, Uncle Luke also said Dagobah was one giant swamp, so for all we know he was high on fungus fumes the whole time."

"Oh, so *now* you don't believe in ghosts? You made us spend four months building a ghost trap cause you wanted to meet one."

"One, we were nine at the time, and two, we're adults now." She paused. "Well, *I* am. You on the other hand still think fart jokes are the last word in humor."

"They're funny and you know it. What do you call it when the Queen Mother of Hapes farts?"

Piett cast a long-suffering gaze at the ceiling. *Thank you, Solo, for your contributions to civilization.*

"A noble gas. Get it?"

"…Tell me you didn't try *that* one on Tenel Ka."

"And the genius part is, I can tailor it to *any* audience. Fr'instance"—he indicated Piett—"what do you call it when the Emperor—"

"Wrong audience," Piett said firmly.

"Okay then, what do you call it when Granddad—"

"Young man, please believe me when I say he will *not* appreciate such…hilarity."

"What, he never laughs?"

Piett glanced at him, scandalized. "Certainly not."

"Shouldn't have told him that," Jaina sighed. "Watch, he'll make it his life mission."

"Then his life is likely to be very brief," Piett said, in a suitably portentous tone.

"I call bantha shavit." Jacen kicked his feet up on the console next to Piett's and folded his arms behind his head, the picture of unconcern. "He has to have *some* sense of humor. I mean, he had two kids, right? So Grandma must have liked him, and nobody likes people with no sense of humor."

Faster, Piett willed the computer.

Jaina laughed. "This from the guy head-over-heels for a woman who can watch Hutt soap operas with a straight face."

"That *is* her sense of humor," said Jacen. Jaina eyed him dubiously. "I bet Granddad goes in for gallows humor."

"You have no idea," Piett cut in, and shot down that subject by stringently adding, "Might I inquire as to why, exactly, I have the pleasure of your company? In this restricted-access library at twenty-two-hundred hours?"

"Research project," said Jacen.

Piett did not like that innocent tone. "Is that so. And what, pray tell, are you researching?"

"It's more of a sociological case study," said Jaina.

"And you selected *this* library because…?"

"It contains a valuable information source."

"One of a kind."

"Not available on the Holonet."

Innocent that he was, Piett's first thought was for the priceless collection of antique printed books occupying a display case on one wall. Then he realized the twins were eyeing him like a pair of circling krakana. "No," he said at once.

"No what?"

"I am *not* entertaining questions concerning Lord Vader."

"Come on," grinned Jacen, "it's not like we want to know what color underwear he wears on Tuesday or something."

Piett struggled against the mental image that was now trying to be born. "Is your mother aware that you're here?"

"Of course," said Jaina virtuously. "She's always encouraging us to hone our diplomatic skills."

"And interrogating me for information about Lord Vader meets her definition of diplomacy?"

Jaina crossed her arms. "We aren't children, Admiral."

"So she *would* be displeased."

"Look, if she is, we'll worry about that." Jaina bit her lip and turned a wide, wistful gaze on him. "Please, Admiral? We've…never had a grandfather before…"

Piett stared, unblinking, into her enormous limpid eyes. Thirty seconds ticked by.

She sighed in defeat. "Overdid the schmaltz factor, didn't I?"

"By approximately three hundred percent," said Piett.

"Told you," Jacen huffed.

"Fine, take two." Jaina pursed her lips for a second, choosing words. "From what Mom and Dad and Aunt Mara are saying, it sounds like Granddad is probably going to come to Coruscant before too long. We'd just like to know what he's like, that's all. From somebody who knows him."

Piett remained unmoved. "Then ask your parents. They have met him several times."

"Yeah," Jacen said slowly, "but they were always enemies then. They never *lived* with him, you know? But we'll have to. And…well, we grew up hearing stories, you know. Most of 'em aren't good."

"None of them are," muttered Jaina. "Except Uncle Luke's, and even that one…" She cleared her throat, crossing her arms defensively. "It just…sounds like his good side is about as big as a Death Star's thermal exhaust port, comparatively speaking."

"Which explains why Uncle Luke's the only one who's ever hit it," Jacen quipped, but Piett wasn't fooled. Though it had been a long time since he'd seen nervous young bravado like that, he remembered it well. Back when he'd still been the *Executor*'s captain under Admiral Ozzel, newly-minted ensigns had used to arrive like clockwork, ten or twelve of them rotating in every month, the best and brightest Academy graduates sent to the furnace of Lord Vader's flagship for refining, desperate to prove that they weren't the sort of fools Vader so despised, haunted by stories of what happened to such people, and trying to hide under a thick layer of swagger. He'd used to take those young ensigns aside before they began serving on the bridge—sit them down in his office for a cup of caf and a little coaching on How Not To Get Killed By Vader. And those poor kids had merely been expected to call him *Sir*, not *Grandfather*.

He cleared his throat, but right then the computer chirped. "Search complete. Fifty-seven million

results for *Obi-Wan Kenobi.*"

"Tell you what," said Jaina. "We'll show you a holo of Anakin Skywalker, and you tell us three things we ought to know before we meet Granddad. That's fair, isn't it?"

Piett considered. "Very well. With the understanding that this conversation remains between the three of us."

"Deal," chorused the twins. Jaina snagged a chair and a moment later Piett found himself the filling in a Solo sandwich, Jacen swiping through the results on his right and Jaina scanning the list with an eagle eye from the left.

"Full disclaimer, we don't actually *know* this is a holo of Granddad," she said. "But we showed it to Uncle Luke and he's pretty sure it is."

"What holo would that be?"

"It's just a minute or two clip from some Outer Rim news agency that folded ages ago. We think it's footage they took in the field during the Clone Wars and never used. Senate passed a freedom-of-information act awhile back to release a lot of old archives that got seized and classified at the beginning of the Empire, and this was in there…"

"I can never remember whether it's the *Naboo Daily Herald* or the *Theed Tribune*," Jacen grumbled.

"Theed," said Jaina. "There, that one."

There ensued a brief spat over whether the clip in question was filed under Malastare, Mygeeto, or Mantooine. Piett finally reclaimed control of the console and searched through each, until the twins both lunged to point at a particular line of code on the screen with simultaneous cries of *that's the one*. With a tight feeling of anticipation locking up his trachea—and hoping that it *was* just anticipation, and not Vader trying to throttle him preemptively from Eriadu—he selected it.

The projector threw up a shuddering holo that appeared to have been recorded inside a GAR troop assault craft. Rows of unhelmeted clones were panned through, laughs and sweat tracks and fierce grins on their identical faces; returning from some successful mission, apparently. The holocam wandered, without commentary from whoever'd been operating it, through the ship into the cockpit.

"—*please* watch where you are flying," a ginger-haired man on the right was saying in exasperation. "And try to remember this is an assault shuttle, not an Eta-2."

"You know, Master," said a tenor voice from out of the recording zone, "since attachment is forbidden, I think you should let go of your totally irrational fear that this ship is somehow going to crash while *I'm* flying it."

The ginger-haired man raised an eyebrow. "Just because I wasn't *on* Sernpidal doesn't mean I don't know what happened there."

"Obviously you don't, if you think it was my fault."

"I know exactly whose fault it was. Senator Amidala was quite clear."

There was a pause. "What did she say?"

"That you and Commander Rex apparently wagered a week of dessert rations on who could shave Drisdin Heights the closest."

"I suppose she didn't mention I beat him by half a meter."

"No, I'm afraid she was more impressed by the fact that you inadvertently flew through the CIS sensor envelope, got attacked by a division of thirty starfighters, and had to call a rescue force down from orbit to pick you up when you crash-landed in the northern hemisphere as a consequence."

"Nobody else would have made it to the northern hemisphere at all," the voice grumbled. "I picked off all those fighters single-handed."

The holocam widened its pickup to reveal the pilot—a tall man with shaggy sweat-curling hair, an intense expression trained on his companion, paying no attention whatsoever to the tree-riddled landscape hurtling by on either side of the viewport.

"Nobody else would have put themselves in that position to *tree*, *tree*—"

The pilot's hand twitched, the ship nipped sideways, and a massive trunk scorched by centimeters to port.

"Blast it, *watch* where you're flying!"

"I always know where I'm flying, Master," the other retorted. Then, still evading trees at point-blank range with one hand, he spun his bucket seat further around to face the holocam full on, irritation simmering under his controlled expression. "Consid—"

Jaina froze the image. "There," she said, and turned an arch look at Jacen. "And *you* wonder why Grandma would have liked him if he didn't have a sense of humor."

Piett stared. There was no denying it. The eyes were a dead giveaway—bold blue, like his son and grandson—but even if they hadn't been, that absolute, commanding self-assurance spoke for itself. And the man carried himself—not just like Vader, perhaps, but certainly the way he imagined Vader would were he less encumbered in leather and durasteel. It was like watching a hand that had taken off a thick glove for the first time.

As for Jaina's commentary…well, having personally failed to impress dozens of females in his Academy days, Piett had a fair idea of what women thought was attractive, and the man in the holo ticked rather a lot of those boxes: tall, muscular, rakishly disheveled, the kind of manly good looks that inspired otherwise intelligent young ladies to start using words like *sultry*. Even the scar over his eye looked dashing—in brutal contrast to the great furrows Piett had glimpsed years ago, marring a head of bald, hideous skin as white and fragile as tissue paper. Somehow it had never occurred to him that that mutilated head could have had hair on it once, could even have inspired a lover's admiring caress.

He stared at the handsome face for a solid minute or two, wondering: *what in the nine hells happened to that man?*

Or maybe the real question was what in the nine hells *hadn't* happened to him.

Jaina unpaused the holo. "—sider this your last warning, Jex. Get that thing out of my face." The pilot stabbed his index finger at the holocam.

"Yes," murmured Piett, half-smiling, "that's certainly him."

The projector went blank immediately; Piett could practically see the *yessirrightawaysirpleasedon'tkillmesir* look on Jex's invisible face. He sat back in his seat with a soft exhale, echoed by the twins. Pensive silence reigned.

"Well," Jacen said, "that's everything *we* know about him." He thumped both elbows forward onto the console, grinning at point blank range. Jaina mirrored him on the left. "Your turn."

Piett pinned Jacen with a scowl.

"Three things," Jaina reminded him, drawing the scowl on herself for a moment while Piett collected his thoughts. At length he cleared his throat.

"I suppose the first thing is to be honest. He'll know you're lying before the words ever leave your mouth."

Massively unimpressed looks repaid him for this jewel of wisdom. "Well *duh*," said Jaina. "Even the Skycrawler can do that, and he's not even two."

"It's kind of a Force-sensitive thing," said Jacen, more kindly.

"Perhaps," said Piett, "but he defines dishonesty very broadly. If you say *pleased to meet you* but are frightened of him, he will consider that a lie, and a cowardly one at that." Which explained the man's total intolerance for politicians. The twins' expressions became much more sober and thoughtful. "Second, be brief. He considers compliments and pleasantries a waste of time at best, and he is not famous for his patience. The longer you take getting to the point, the less likely he is to receive it well."

"Huh." Jacen considered that with steadily increasing approval. "Short on patience, blunt, and we already know he likes to fly…you think he's maybe Corellian, Jaya?"

"Could be." Jaina caught Piett's eye. "Have you ever heard him say *don't tell me the odds*?"

"That would require the odds to be against him," Piett replied dryly. You would have had to stack two sector fleets against Vader before any bookkeeper would accept wagers on him.

"Not Corellian," the twins agreed, with a concerted nod.

"So," pressed Jaina, "what's number—"

A loud chime coming from the other end of the room cut her off. Three chairs spun toward the holocom station, where an incoming transmission signal had begun blinking.

"I'm afraid it will have to wait." Piett stood, straightening his uniform jacket on reflex. Next moment he realized that had been a telling mistake. The twins shot up on the edges of their seats like kath hounds who'd scented a roasting nuna.

"That's *him* calling, isn't it?" Jaina's eyes glinted.

Piett ignored the question. "It is a matter of urgent business. I must ask you both to leave at once."

"It *is* him," Jacen breathed, eyes fixed on the holocom station with desperate fascination.

Piett pinched his lips together. Every ounce of common sense he possessed was ringing danger alerts; but as they had just warned him a moment ago, they were Force-sensitive and not easily deceived. "Most likely," he ground out. "But it is not my place to introduce you. That decision rests

with your parents."

"We'll stay right here," Jacen insisted.

"We won't say a word."

"We won't *breathe*!"

"No," Piett said firmly. "The topic to be discussed is classified."

"We already know about it! Mom is the Chief of—"

"And if I have to call security to escort you out," Piett warned, "I will."

Jaina crossed her arms, eyes narrowed. "Fine. Sure you want to keep him waiting that long?"

"Cause it's going to take awhile." Jacen grinned. "Our mom is—"

"I'm aware of who she is!" Piett covered his brow with one hand, cursing under his breath as only a man with forty years in uniform could. But they were right, blast them; it was unwise to keep Vader waiting. "Suit yourselves," he said finally "Not a *sound*, either of you."

They beamed and nodded, leaning forward in their seats for the best possible view. Piett gave his jacket another frustrated twitch and marched over to the station. As Vader's towering form sprang forth in the life-size projection, he felt the twins stiffen with excitement—but true to their word, not a sound escaped.

"Good evening, my—"

The index finger pounced. "Do not think you can deceive me, Admiral. Who is it that you have invited to eavesdrop?"

Six *hundred* lightyears away and he *still*—it just wasn't *fair*! How could he possibly—

Belatedly he realized that a man who could take a head count from six hundred lightyears away probably wouldn't have any difficulty reading what was in those heads. "I beg your pardon, my lord. Just before you called I received some unexpected visitors. However"—he scowled at the twins—"they are leaving *as we speak.*"

With synchronization so perfect a drill sergeant would have swooned with delight, the junior Solos crossed their arms, thumped back in their seats, and raised their right eyebrows, projecting such a resounding attitude of *like-hell-we-are* that the only wonder would have been if Vader *hadn't* sensed it.

"It would seem your powers of persuasion leave much to be desired," said Vader. "Perhaps your visitors would prefer to deal with *me*."

Piett's esophagus tried to turn itself inside out. "That won't be necessary, sir." He forced himself to sound jaunty. "I'm sure they—"

Vader pointed his basilisk gaze straight beyond the pickup of the transmission sensors to where the twins were sitting, now pale-faced. Dread had belatedly gotten the better of their curiosity. "I insist," he purred.

Damn. Piett froze, thoughts churning—Vader would be furious if he picked now of all times to be obstreperous—but what the Princess would do to him didn't bear thinking on—

Jaina suddenly stood. Jacen started out of his seat after her. "Jaya, you don't have to, I'll—"

"I'm oldest," she murmured, as solemn and final as a captain preparing to go down with her ship. She took a deep breath, then marched across the room and stepped into the pickup with a small but determined smile. "Hello, Granddad. I'm Jaina. How are you?"

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tbc

Chapter End Notes

I'm not even sorry :)

Chapter 9

"Hi, Granddad. I'm Jaina."

She'd said it. She had actually gone and *said it to his face.*

Piett had thought that frightened look of a moment ago had meant she'd had some sense knocked into her. Well, he wouldn't be assuming *that* about anybody named Solo ever again.

But Vader only said: "Child. What are you doing there?"

"Nothing much. We're just keeping your admiral entertained."

Vader gripped his belt with one hand—hanging on for dear life, Piett would have said, if it had been anybody else in the known universe. "We?"

"What the hells," Jacen muttered, and joined her at the station, forcing Piett off to the side. "Us. Me and her. I'm Jacen. Uh…hi."

The black stare ticked from twin to twin, like the needle on a Geiger counter. "Is your mother aware of this?"

Piett blinked. The question almost—no, it *did* imply a tremendous concession—an *unheard-of* concession—that, at least where teenage children surnamed Solo were concerned, Darth Vader's wishes must defer to those of the Princess. This, from the same Darth Vader who had never taken orders from anyone but the Emperor or the Emperor's puppet *du jour*, such as Tarkin had been.

Jaina tipped her head slightly to the side. "Now she is."

Safely out of the pickup range, Piett mopped his suddenly clammy forehead. Back in Eriadu, Vader seemed to be having a difficult time finding words. It had probably been decades since the man had last had to introduce himself to somebody on civil terms.

"Are you coming to Coruscant soon?" Jacen ventured, in a surge of nerve.

"That," Vader thundered, "will depend."

Jacen's eyebrows shot up in alarm as the rest of him sprang reflexively to attention. "Yes—I mean yessir," he agreed, without bothering to ask what he was agreeing with.

Jaina was not so easily intimidated. "On what?"

"On whether my admiral has an opportunity of discussing the negotiations with me," Vader boomed, "or continues to be interrupted by insolent children."

"Yessir," Jacen stammered. "Sorry we interrupted." Piett did not like the look in his twin's eye, however. She was only too clearly taking the measure of her opponent—and unlike Jacen, appeared to be finding the odds to her liking.

"*I'm* not," she said, crossing her arms. "He's had you all to himself for twenty-five years. I think it's our turn. And we aren't children either," she added testily. "We're eighteen. I'm starting at Academy in a couple months."

There was a taut silence. Piett caught himself holding his breath.

"Perhaps not a child," Vader conceded at length. "Certainly insolent." Jacen remained stiffer than the cold-case wing of the Galactic City Morgue, but Jaina grinned. She seemed to have figured out in five minutes what Piett had taken years to comprehend: Vader's aggression was quite often no more than his way of testing your mettle.

Of course, it was also quite often his way of editing unsatisfactory life-forms from the galactic script, but dwelling on the negative never got you anywhere.

"Comes of being Corellian," Jaina answered, just on the safe side of flippant.

With what must have been superhuman effort, Vader passed up this sterling opportunity to insult his son-in-law. "What specialization have you chosen?"

"Starfighter pilot."

"Good." His tone made it abundantly clear he considered this the only military career acceptable for persons descended from him. The helmet swiveled. "And does your brother also plan to attend Academy?"

"Uh, well, not just yet," Jacen replied.

"*Not just yet*?" Jaina demanded *sotto voce*. "Last summer you said never in a million years!"

"Last summer I didn't know *he'd* be asking," Jacen hissed back.

Piett cleared his throat loudly. Call him paranoid, but it seemed better to cut this first conversation short on a high note. Or at least a note not too far below middle C. "Master Solo, Miss Solo, I'm afraid I really must speak with Lord Vader privately now. The committee is due to reconvene in forty minutes."

Jacen nudged his sister with his elbow and flicked his chin towards the door, and this time she relented. "Alright. I guess…we'll see you later, then, Granddad."

"It would seem the Force has willed it so, child."

Jaina's eyebrows went up indignantly, signaling the onset of a Royal Snit a la Leia Organa. "I am *not* a—"

"Yep, looks that way," Jacen said loudly over her, grabbing her arm and towing her backwards. "Nice talking to you, Granddad!"

Jaina tugged her arm as he marched her out of the room, protesting half-heartedly. A moment later Jacen's wicked grin popped back around the frame. He waggled three fingers at Piett. "You still owe us the third one, remember!" The door whooshed shut. Piett turned with unaccustomed relief back to Vader and found himself the object of profound suspicion.

"What is it that you owe them?"

He cleared his throat. "Oh, it's nothing of consequence, my lord."

Vader's forefinger lasered in on him. "If this has anything to do with that repulsive card game my son insists on propagating—"

Piett prayed to gods he hadn't found out about the lightsaber. Or the Emperor's portrait. "Nothing

whatsoever, sir, I assure you. Have you had an opportunity of reviewing the report?"

"In spite of Jedi interference, yes."

"Jedi interference" was his new phrase for anything Skywalker did to irritate him, ranging from destruction of Imperial property (his holocom) to corruption of Imperial officers (Rebel sabacc, fast becoming a shipwide craze) to taking outrageous personal liberties ("good night, Father, sleep well"). Piett had already heard the complaint too many times to spare it a second thought.

Particularly not given how many other things there were to weigh on his mind. "And what is your opinion of the committee's revised proposals?"

He asked purely for form's sake. There was one new demand guaranteed to send him back to the table with a withering refusal that he'd somehow have to translate into less offensive phrasing—

Vader waved a hand. "They are acceptable."

Piett, stylus poised over his datapad ready to start taking notes, froze in total shock for more than five seconds before looking back up at Vader. "A-acceptable, sir?"

"That is correct, Admiral."

"Are you sure?" he blurted. Vader's mask snapped around to him, whether in anger or surprise he couldn't tell. Likely both; he'd *never* questioned Vader's decisions to his face, let alone been such an idiot as to do it without a single *my lord* or *sir*.

But it turned out thirty years of faithful service was enough for Vader to allow one infraction to slide. "You have an objection?"

How could the objection not be leaping off the flimsy at the man? "I—well, yes, my lord, I—I have some very deep concerns about section 3A and following. I—forgive me, my lord, but I *did* send the documents with today's time stamp? There hasn't been—some confusion on my part with an earlier draft?"

"There had better not be, Admiral, for your sake." Vader nevertheless deigned to consult his copy of the report. "Section 3A refers to the arrangements concerning the ship."

Piett swallowed. "And…I beg your pardon, but it *does* state that the *Executor* is to be—to be formally—"

"Surrendered," Vader finished. "That is correct. You have some objection to this?"

That mechanical voice had never sounded so merciless or dispassionate. He could hardly believe his own ears. "I—we cannot simply surrender her after—"

"What do you suggest be done with her instead?"

Piett swallowed. "Sir, I—I realize she's in bad shape. The expense of refurbishing her would be—"

"Prohibitive." The word slashed down like a guillotine blade. "Nor are we in a position to prolong these negotiations. Political leadership under democratic auspices is fickle at best. The Princess may continue in office for another decade or be impeached tomorrow, and if she is, you will find that her successor places a steeper price on peace than one obsolete dreadnought barely fit for scrap. I intend to secure our tactical advantage while it may be secured." He paused his tirade, studying Piett with, perhaps, a shade less indifference than before. "The necessity is perhaps to be

regretted, but the ship is no longer of any use. Therefore neither is her crew. And as both they and you are offered employment by the New Republic military reserve forces, you can have no reason for remaining aboard her."

"Sir," he began hoarsely, "I swore an oath to—"

"That is irrelevant, Admiral. There is no longer an Empire to require your services. Inform the committee that their terms are accepted."

The connection went dead. Piett stared at the blank projector for he knew not how long. Several times his hand hovered recklessly over the *transmit* key, though what he'd say, he had no idea. There *was* nothing to be said. The man had given his orders and all that was left was to obey them. Make an end of it. Perhaps, after all, it would have been best to die at Endor. A warrior's death. No disgrace in that.

He was still staring when the door opened and the Princess appeared.

"Admiral. I've come to let you know that—is everything all right?"

Purely out of habit he was able to force a polite smile. "Forgive me. I—I suddenly feel very tired."

The smile gave out on him. He peeled off his cap and kneaded his forehead.

"Then you'll be glad to hear I've postponed our reconvention until tomorrow evening," she said.

The thought of lying awake all night thinking of nothing but what he'd have to say at the table sickened him. "I'd prefer to have done with it, actually."

The Princess raised an eyebrow. "That would be inhospitable of us. Particularly when you've had to put up with my children's antics for an hour."

Piett's earlier horror came faintly back to him, and must have showed on his face, for the Princess immediately shook her head. "From what they told me, I don't think any harm was done." Her gaze wandered thoughtfully for a moment. "In fact, I…I think it might be quite the opposite."

"They told you that they spoke with him?"

"Every word." She laughed softly at his skeptical expression. "They're reckless to a fault, I grant you, but they take their knocks on the chin. Just like their father."

"I see." He cleared his throat. "Your Highness, can we not reconvene in the morning at least? I shall merely be wasting my day otherwise." One night would be hell enough without the following day thrown into the bargain.

The Princess studied him closely. He had a nasty feeling she suspected his real reasons had little to do with impatience. Deliberately, she shook her head. "I understand how you feel, Admiral. I've felt that way myself many times before, when a negotiation is on the cusp. I've found the wisest course of action is to take a good long pause and give everyone a chance to clear their minds of possible regrets or resentment. Peace too fast is usually worse than no peace at all."

There was, as always, nothing for him to do but comply.

Sleep proved as impossible as he'd feared. The walls of his plush suite seemed to bend inward on him, Vader's cold orders echoing off them endlessly in the silence. Finally, around oh-three-hundred hours, he threw on his uniform jacket and stormed out into Imperial Palace. He needed to have space, a sense of going somewhere, of being involved in a bigger whole with other busy people…

His boots rang dully on the marble tiles, loud in the dim and quiet that had settled over the diplomatic suites. Too dim. Too quiet. What in the hells were they all doing in bed? Wasn't Coruscant supposed to be the planet that never slept? Kest, how he missed the Lady, right down to the gods-damned mouse droids that were always getting underfoot and trying to break his neck. A warship never slept; her shifts came and went, but her crew was always about its business.

Finally he picked up on a distant, crowdlike hum and followed it, until a much brighter beam of light bowed him through an archway onto a sprawling balcony of sorts. A cavernous hall opened to view, below and above and for what must be three kilometers in either direction. Imposing geometric columns vaulted from twenty levels below past his balcony and into a ribbed ceiling thirty levels over his head. He stopped in his tracks; the sheer vastness of it demanded his full attention.

"The Grand Corridor," said a heavy CoCo Town accent. Piett glanced to his left and saw a security checkpoint under the complacent eye of a Palace guard. "First time 'ere, guv'nor?"

"Yes…" His hands closed over the rail. Here was the looted glory of the Empire, still echoing before his eyes. What a figure Vader must have cut down that concourse in those days! Here was a setting built to the scale of such a force of nature as he was. How many holos and broadcasts Piett had seen of the formal Empire Day processions, winding down this hall to the ceremonial Plaza Gates, out onto the Grand Promenade from which the Emperor had once made his public addresses to masses of flag-waving millions as flights of TIEs swept overhead and entire battalions of the Imperial Armed Forces paraded in unison on the sprawling expanse of the Pliada…but that was all gone now, just the shell left.

"It's a sight, innit?" The guard sauntered up, thumbs stuck in his belt, with the possessive air of a museum curator.

"Yes. I suppose you must be familiar with it."

"Oh, aye. Bin working 'ere since the Reconstruction." He did a double-take at Piett's uniform jacket. "'Ere now, you're that admiral what come back from the Unknown Regions, aren't ye?" He prodded Piett's insignia. "You're *Vader*'s admiral, aren't ye?"

Piett scowled and batted the finger away. "For now, at least." He wasn't sure what the guard would do with that information. Shoot him, for all he knew—but once they took away the Lady, everything between here and his grave would just be filler anyway.

"Cor," said the guard, looking impressed. "You actually *know* 'im then."

"Better than most, I suppose." Before Eriadu he'd have said *better than anyone*, but that was before Skywalker started pulling things out of the man nobody could have suspected him of containing, like a Falleen magician putting on a show with a bottomless puzzle box.

"Blimey," the guard said. There was something gratifying about how impressed he looked. "Y'know, my dad used to work security 'ere too back in Empire days. Said 'e saw Vader once. Said 'e could read your mind from a sector away."

It was more question than comment. "Ten sectors," said Piett. Actually, it might be eleven from here to Eriadu.

"I seen a holovid what said 'e took out a whole regiment o'Rebels at Vrogos Vas single-handed," mused the guard. "You ever seen 'im scrag anybody?"

Piett pursed his lips. "I don't care to discuss it."

"But you *did* see 'im do it?"

"Yes," he said, to put a stop to the question.

"It true 'e can scrag you without layin' a hand on you?"

"I said I don't care to—oh, very well, *yes*, it's true."

Ten days of Borsk Fey'lya's oozing, velveted contempt made the guard's admiration difficult to refuse, however morbid. The man beamed at this revelation, then nodded as if he'd known it all along. "Thought it were. Young 'uns nowadays say it's all spacer's tales 'bout 'im. *I* say, they weren't around then."

Amazing, the things people could get nostalgic about. "You remember the Empire, then?"

"Cor, do I! Weren't but a sprout then, but I remember sure enough. See them big Republic crests on the walls?" He pointed out at the Grand Corridor. "When I used to visit my dad on the job them were Imperial crests. Still there unnerneath, you know, cut inter the wall and such."

Piett swallowed a brief but intense flash of resentment. It was the flags all over again, only worse.

"Wunnerful place, this. Seen the Forest of Kashyyyk yet?"

Piett blinked. "The what?"

"The colonnade in the North Wing, what the Wookiees gave the Republic five hunnert years back. Seen it?"

"I—no, I didn't know it existed."

"'Ere now," said the guard, ballooning with indignation. "Can't miss that. I'll take you if you like."

"You needn't trouble yourself," Piett said quickly. "I'm—"

"No trouble, Adm'ral, none t'all. 'Alf a minute, I'll get one of the boys on patrol to take that there checkpoint."

Piett's irritation over being press-ganged soon evaporated. The guard proved a first-rate tour guide, and the Forest of Kashyyyk—comprised of two hundred hand-sculpted wroshyr trees, each over five hundred meters in height and over three thousand years in age—did not fall short of his praise. Warmed to his work, the guard proceeded to exhibit the Serenno Ballroom—"six million tiles in that there floor, twelve layers o'enamel on each one of em, three days' work by hand"—the hall where the Emperor had presided over state dinners at a ten-meter-long dining table carved from a single block of Alderaanian sea crystal—"woulda bankrupted a Mid-Rim system to buy it, and that's a'fore the Death Star come into it"—and wound up at the Mausoleum, a vast honorary cemetery where the heroes of the galaxy were memorialized.

Or rather, where the heroes of whoever happened to be running the galaxy were memorialized; it

had undergone some rather pointed renovations since changing hands. The corridor of placards honoring Imperial military heroes had been replaced by a long sandstone wall, engraved with the names of every being known to have been on Alderaan at its last instant. On the opposite wall, a row of kinetic sculptures slowly flowed through the faces of the protestors who'd been killed in the Ghorman Massacre, when the future Butcher of Alderaan had tenderly landed his *Imperial*-class destroyer on their heads. And at the far end of the hall enshrining all of Tarkin's personal contributions to the galaxy's woes danced a tall column of light, mesmerizing the eye in a constant, interwoven upward rush—a memorial to the Jedi of old. The epitaph at the base read: *There is no death, there is the Force*.

What mockery. They'd died alright, down to the month-old infants in the Temple crèche. Three guesses who'd done that little chore for the Emperor.

"Lovely, innit?" said the guard, reverently. Piett muttered something noncommittal, looking away from the epitaph. Nausea was beginning to roil his gut, and he wished he could put it down to mere exhaustion.

"But this," the guard went on, "this 'ere I think you'll 'specially like."

He'd seen more than enough to sate him; the beauties of the Empire pilfered away or swept beneath the rug of history, and its ugliest deeds put on public display like a moral freak show. "I appreciate it. But it's been a long night. I think I should like to return to my suite."

"Only 'alf a minute more, guv'nor," his amateur guide urged. "You won't 'ave cause to regret it. Just a step this way."

Piett turned, intending firmly to shut the offer down, and stopped in surprise at the sight of a tall pair of copper-sheathed doors embossed with an Imperial crest—the only one he'd seen in the entire Palace. A blinking red light on the control panel indicated it was locked, but the guard made a show of unlocking it with his code cylinder. "Yavin Memorial Hall," he announced.

Piett stood still for a long moment more, then crossed quickly over the threshold. A short, curved corridor led him into total blackness, and then rounded a corner into a galaxy of lights, extending in every direction around him, forming a perfect sphere with a glittering orb of white crystal suspended in the center above him.

"It's meant to be the Death Star," the guard informed him. "That there crystal's a kyber, same as was used on the station to focus the laser."

Piett nodded, swallowing hard as he looked about him. He did not need the guard to tell him that there were exactly one million, five hundred and fifty-six thousand, two hundred and ninety-six lights surrounding them. "I can't believe this is still here," he got out.

"Well, they don't gen'rally open it except for family," said the guard. "It were the Emperor that had it made, and there's some would like it smashed to bits, see. But they was most of 'em reg'lar men on that station too, says I." He cleared his throat. "You take your time, Adm'ral. I'll be just outside whenever you're ready."

Piett found a bench along one wall and sat, thinking, remembering, mourning. A few of those lights had been friends; not his nearest or his dearest, but men he'd liked and respected all the same; and there was probably not a survivor of the old Navy but remembered where he'd been when word of that terrible defeat broke. He wondered if Vader had ever set foot here…and if he had, whether it had meant anything to him at all. Or had he shrugged all those lives off too, the same way he'd just shrugged off the *Executor* and all the people who looked to him…

When he emerged, the guard was deep in conversation with somebody at the other end of a comlink; he held up a finger to indicate he'd be along in a minute and stepped out a side door. Morosely Piett wandered the other direction. Passing the pillar of light, he discovered a stained glass window at the end of the corridor, facing true east. A faint predawn glow had just begun to illuminate the image of a woman dressed in white, the guardian angel of all these remembered dead, perhaps. Kindness mingled with sorrow in her expression, tempting his grief and betrayed feeling right out of their hiding places, straight to the tip of his tongue, and before he realized what a stupid thing he was doing: "Did they take everything you believed in, too?"

You, his rational side seethed, *are talking to a damned* window.

But the rest of him had already decided his rational side could go to hell for once. He needed someone to talk to, and she seemed like she'd listen.

"My commander's told me to surrender," he went on. "I've spent thirty years following him. Not because of *him* really. He's a first-rate son of a bitch, begging your pardon. But he *was* the Empire to us in many ways, and the Empire meant a great deal to me. I assumed it meant something to him too." He swallowed. "It appears I was wrong."

He could've sworn she had somehow nodded at him. Certainly she looked as if she understood every word.

"Do you know what it's like? To give everything to someone, only to have them drop you like so much trash in the end?"

Silent compassion seemed to flow toward him with the feeble light.

"*We* believed in it, you know," he said hoarsely. "What the Empire meant, what it was, what it was going to be. As much as any Rebel believed in the Republic. We let *him* wring our necks like nuna chicks because we believed—*I* let him—"

His throat was suddenly too swollen with anger and guilt to get words out. His gaze fell, blurring, to the granite slab floor, thinking of his own personal mausoleum—the *Avenger,* Admiral Ozzel, poor Lorth Needa—if ever a man had deserved a monument it had to be Needa. Men who'd fallen brutally at Vader's hand—rightly so, he'd told himself all these years. Ridiculous as it had sounded, the word from above had been clear: *the security of the Empire depends on capturing Luke Skywalker*. Those who failed in this task put at risk the Empire they'd sworn to serve, which was practically treason, if you stretched the definition in the right direction...

…only he couldn't tell himself anymore that *that* was why Vader had killed them. Not since that moment in the observation office.

Piett wrung his fingers furiously together. "Well, it's obvious now, anyway," he told the woman in the window. "He doesn't give a damn about the Empire and he never has. I daresay he never cared about anyone but that insane son of his." He snorted bitterly. "Whom he doesn't *begin* to deserve, by the way. That boy waltzes in, forgives every gods-damned thing the man ever did to him, and what does he do? Tries to chase him off every chance he gets! He doesn't know *how* to carry on a relationship with another human being, he's more machine than—"

He stopped dead. Her presence acted like a mirror, reflecting back to him what he was actually saying. A man who'd lived without family for—how long?—about fifty years. A man who'd lived encased in a walking sarcophagus for *half a century*, cut off from all normal aspects of human life and society, surely as if he'd been buried alive in a dungeon—and because he was strong he'd survived, consuming every living thing around him in unspeakable ways, all the scurrying

frightened rats like Piett and Ozzel and Needa.

And maybe, after that long in the dungeon, the only way he knew how to care for something was to shove it the hell away from him.

Was *that* what was going on here? Maybe he hadn't ever given a damn for the Empire…but did it follow that he'd never given a damn about Firmus W. Piett?

He sat down on the closest bench, feeling lightheaded. But hadn't Jade called him Vader's friend? And…Vader hadn't contradicted her.

But even so, what was *he* supposed to do about it? He was no Luke Skywalker. He was just the dunce who hadn't had the sense to resign or die at any point in the past twenty-eight years—

In a burst of glory the rising son blazed through the window, setting fire to the reddish tints in the marbled-honey glass of the woman's hair and flashing her eyes full of life. Something else dawned on him too. It hadn't been *Skywalker* who'd gotten Vader to stop trying to drive his son away. It had been *Jade*.

And she hadn't done it by trying not to step on his toes; she'd marched right into his face and started stomping. She hadn't had any immunity from his wrath. She'd just cared about something more than her life.

The way he'd just found out he cared about his command.

Piett stared bleakly at the serene countenance of the woman in the window. "Why me?"

"Adm'ral?" a voice echoed behind him. Piett sucked in a sharp breath, wrestling his face for composure, and got the neutral expression pinned down just as the guard trundled into view.

"Beg your pardon," he said, climbing back to his feet. "I…just stopped to admire this window."

"Ah," nodded the guard, munificently. "They all do that as see her. A right angel, in't she?"

He worked his throat. "Yes. Who…" He trailed off as his eyes landed on a little plaque below the window.

Love always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.

But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away.

Given by the Sovereign System of Naboo

In Loving Memory Of

Padmé Amidala Naberrie

Queen – Senator – Servant

46BBY-19BBY

TBC

Chapter 10

"What do you mean *you won't.*"

Nobody could make a question sound so much like a pronouncement of doom as Darth Vader. Piett cleared his throat. "It's not so much that I *won't*, my lord," he said, "as that I've decided not to."

Vader stared at him—goggled, actually. No amount of durasteel armor could conceal consternation of that magnitude; Piett could practically see the man's mask turning purple. Behind him, sitting just within view, Skywalker ducked forward, elbows on his knees and head down in a futile effort to hide the fit of mirth shaking his shoulders. Belatedly Piett realized that his cheeky reply sounded like a quote from *Cryptic Jedi Proverbs Through the Ages* by L. Skywalker.

The fact was certainly not lost on Vader; he whirled and stabbed a forefinger at his offspring. "I should never have let *you* anywhere near him."

Skywalker, possibly asphyxiating on sheer glee, could only shake his head in mute denial.

Piett cleared his throat, mustering his courage. "He's had no part in it, sir. I—"

"He has had *every* part in it," Vader snapped over his shoulder. "His mere presence is sufficient to set an entire system on end, let alone one impressionable admiral."

Skywalker looked up, doing his best impression of a dutiful firstborn son, but his heart obviously wasn't in it; his eyes cackled. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"It's my decision, sir, no one else's." Piett cleared his throat again and hastily went on. "I've prepared a fresh set of proposals for this evening's session, if you would care to—"

"I ordered you to accept the terms offered yesterday," Vader snarled. "You will present no new proposals. You will carry out my orders or suffer the consequences."

Piett set his jaw and fought the urge to glance at Skywalker, his sole hope of surviving what he intended to say next. *Sith Whisperer, don't fail me now.* "Actually, sir, I've thought matters over, and as best I can make out, I am no longer obligated to accept your orders."

Dead silence.

For the second time Vader gaped at him, unable to comprehend that his reliable doormat of an admiral could finally have developed a spine after all this time. But fury caught up quickly. Piett could almost see it swelling the armor outward, wrath bulging from every orifice, and knew he'd made his last-ever mistake.

Vader started forward, one arm reaching fatally across the lightyears—then Skywalker seized him by the elbow. "Father—please."

Those two soft words somehow packed the punch of a quad-laser blast. Vader's fists balled. He ceased trying to break his son's grip and looked back into a pair of urgent, relentless blue eyes. For a long while they stared at one another in silence, speaking thought to thought perhaps. Then,

almost audibly, Vader's rage sucked back in, and he retreated a step from the holoprojector, flinging his son's hand off his arm. Piett let out a shaky breath. *If we ever get to the other side of this, Skywalker, I'm buying you a liter of hundred-year-old Whyren's.*

Skywalker winked at him. Piett's inner accountant instantly regretted the thought.

"And what," Vader spat, "gave you that fantastical idea, Admiral?"

Piett tried to look as inoffensive and reasonable as possible. Which wasn't very much of either, given what he was about to say. "You did, sir, publicly abdicate the Imperial throne several weeks ago. By all precedent this entails the resignation of any military offices you held. Consequently"—if this was the end he might as well go out with a bang—"I have no remaining obligations to execute your orders."

Silence stretched, while Vader sought to absorb the incredible fact that anybody could be so monumentally stupid as to make that comment to his face not once but twice.

"You know, Father," put in Skywalker brightly, before the silence was quite long enough to hang someone with, "he's right."

The respirator ran through two exceedingly put-upon-sounding cycles before Vader turned to glower at the more experienced voice of insurrection.

"He'd actually be in dereliction of his duty if he *did* execute your orders."

The forefinger pounced. "When I require the assistance of rebels and traitors to interpret Imperial naval protocol, I will apprise you of the fact."

"Technically, you should've been kicked off the ship weeks ago—"

"*Enough*." The thundering bass dropped to a dangerous hiss. "It is unlikely the admiral will survive this conversation if I am compelled to eject his defensive force field from my quarters." Vader's helmet revolved to pin its withering regard on Piett. "That was your purpose in requesting his presence, was it not?"

Piett forced a faint smile. "I simply know that you value his opinion, sir."

Vader snorted. "His opinion is inconsequential. He is an interfering and overconfident whelp."

"I get that from my mother's side, you know," put in Skywalker, in a pitch-perfect imitation of Solo's cheery sarcasm. Piett went from forcing a smile to smothering laughter—then panicked all over again as Vader whirled on his son like a striking vaapad.

"Your mother is *not* a matter of jest, boy."

"I'm not making fun of my mother," said Skywalker, laying on more condescension than Piett had heard anybody address to Darth Vader since Admiral Ozzel and the So Many Uncharted Settlements fiasco of '22. "I'm making fun of *you*. Been awhile, I take it."

"What you are doing," Vader snarled, "is being a deliberate and disrespectful nuisance."

"Yes," said Skywalker. "I am. But *he* is not." He flicked his chin at Piett, suddenly in dead earnest. "By everything I've seen for the past couple months, *he* is a competent, courteous man who is well-regarded by all his subordinates. By you too, since we've just established you can't put up with a disrespectful nuisance for five minutes, let alone twenty-five years."

“Twenty-*eight*.”

Vader and Piett stopped at the same time, startled glances darting between them before they both found other things to look at—meaning Skywalker, who was shaking his head with a wry but benevolent smile. “My apologies, twenty-eight years. My point is, he obviously is an expert in not pushing your buttons. Don’t you think he must have a pretty strong reason for doing it now?”

“His *reason,*” said Vader, glaring blaster bolts at his pontificating progeny, “is all too obvious.”

“As inspiring as I am, I don’t think he’s so dumb he’d try to score points with *me* by irritating *you*.”

Vader made noise of utter exasperation and paced away from what he evidently would have the universe believe was the bane of his existence. On the far side of the platform he about-faced and stormed back the other way, eyes boring into Piett as he passed. “Do you intend to explain yourself, or will you merely continue to stand there like a wiped protocol unit?”

Something went *tick* in his brain, and Firmus W. Piett was suddenly angrier than he’d ever been in his life. “I shouldn’t *have* to explain it, *sir*. I accepted a responsibility to the honor of the Empire when I assumed command of this vessel. I swore an oath never to surrender her, and the entire galaxy can go to *ten* hells before I’ll break it, not excepting you, *sir!*”

Words ran out and he just stood there, scowling and half-panting. Vader had frozen mid-stalk, staring at him—he’d really caught him at the knees, by gods, he’d managed to throw that blasted metal bastard a curve ball at last! He felt—*powerful*, for a change, downright tipsy with adrenaline, and yes, he’d probably signed his death warrant big and bold with that little speech, Skywalker was half out of his seat looking like he expected a murder any instant, but who cared! Stars! If this was what letting your anger run wild felt like, no wonder Vader had never bothered to rein it in!

Except…except maybe he *was* right now. In fact Piett couldn’t see any of the usual signs of temper—literally none. Vader had become as still and blank as a durasteel bulkhead, as if confronted by some inexplicable new organism. As if Piett hadn’t been entirely real to him until this instant. In the background, still watchful, Skywalker eased back into his seat.

“I know there isn’t an Empire anymore,” Piett finally said, when several minutes had crawled by with no indication that Vader planned on speaking. “Maybe it was only ever a—a job to you, sir. But it *meant* something to me, and I won’t dishonor that now. If I can by any means preserve this piece of it that we’ve kept alive all these years, I intend to.”

Vader finally stirred, and Piett braced for the inevitable tidal wave of scorn. But the man only turned to Skywalker.

“Leave us.”

Skywalker studied him closely for several seconds; then he nodded, shot Piett a reassuring wink, and vanished from the transmission field. A moment later Piett heard the distant *whish* of a sealing door, and gripped his hands tightly behind his back as Vader turned back to him.

“You think that *I* have betrayed *you*, Admiral?”

Piett gulped, hoping it wasn’t obvious. “I never said that, my lord.”

“You have more than implied it.”

Piett worked his hands behind his back, old habit telling him to shut up and leave the bait lying—

but no. No, he was done with that.

“That was not my intent, sir. But yes, I do feel that way to some extent. Had I or any other Fleet commander yielded our command in such a manner you would not have excused it in the slightest. And not just myself but every man aboard this vessel has made great efforts and great sacrifices in the service of the Empire for the past twenty-five years. Dropping them with so little ceremony after all of that would—” He had to stop, anger and grief getting the better of him momentarily.

Vader had never had patience for displays of lamentation. “Would *what*, Admiral?”

Piett forced himself back under control. “It would tell them that everything they’ve done hasn’t meant anything to you. Don’t do that to them, sir.” He swallowed hard. “Don’t do that.”

“Do you think I am some omnipotent machine?” Vader hissed. “Do you think I can repair this ship to a defensible state with a wave of my hand? Do you expect me to re-staff and re-provision her out of vacuum? Even if I could achieve that much, how long do you expect me to keep this ship intact against the entire Republic fleet?”

“We’ve survived outrageous odds before, sir.”

“There comes a time,” Vader answered flatly, “when one can do nothing but accept one’s fate. It is pointless to resist destiny.”

“I don’t agree with that, sir.” Boldly he added, “I don’t think your son would either.”

Vader spun away in another exasperated huff. “I should *not* have let him anywhere near you.”

“It really wasn’t him, sir.”

“Then you are as great a fool as he is.”

Piett squared his jaw stubbornly. “If by that you mean we both care about your welfare in spite of your best efforts to discourage us, then I take that as a compliment, my lord.”

He could see the astonishment fast turning into dismissal, so he added, “And you can’t tell me I don’t know what I’m saying. I’ve known you for nearly thirty years, sir, and I’m still here. I—I should think that would deserve a little of your trust, at least.”

That was really what it came down to—whether Vader trusted him enough to believe that his defiance wasn’t a betrayal. Twenty-eight years, and now the moment of decision. Vader stood silent for a disheartening length of time.

“It deserves more than a little, Admiral,” he said finally. “That I have none to dispense is not your doing.” He looked away, into some middle distance, remembering, regretting—something, Piett wasn’t sure what, except that it had obviously involved some grievous betrayal. Kenobi? Was that why no form of treason, however inconsequential, had ever met with the slightest mercy from him?

Watch you don’t get into waters too deep for you. Not even Skywalker could mention Kenobi with impunity.

“Well, my lord,” he said, with exaggerated cheerfulness, “the nice thing about retirement is, one can afford a few risks.”

“Retirement?”

“You *did* abdicate, sir.”

Vader speared him with a forefinger. “Trust is one matter, Admiral. Patience is another.”

“I’m certain your leadership in both respects shall to continue to inspire us for years to come, sir.”

Vader visibly fumed. “I see it is also imperative you be removed from the Princess’ influence, before you are contaminated beyond repair.”

“Yes, well.” Piett coughed. “I must admit that one was hers.” He thought fondly of the lovely shade of blue Borsk Fey’lya had turned when she’d tossed it at him.

Vader gestured at him impatiently. “Very well. What are these proposals you plan to impose upon me and the committee?”

Piett reined in his giddiness and tried to look like a serious, intelligent, resourceful man of experience with a foresighted and ingenious plan. “In brief, sir, I intend to propose—

“—that the *Executor* be repurposed as an orbital education and training facility.”

Borsk Fey’lya’s eyeballs bulged. “*Education and training facility*?”

“Yes, Senator. I am given to understand that the New Republic operates many older Star Destroyers, including several of the *Executor*’s class. Surely it would be to your fleet’s advantage to have a ship available where cadets can train without throwing a hydrospanner into field operations.”

“And *who,*” Fey’lya bellowed, “*gave you to understand that?”*

The Princess cleared her throat, with some amusement. “I don’t believe that the Fleet roster constitutes classified information, Councilor. Am I wrong, General Cracken?”

“Spot on as usual, Princess,” said the general from New Republic Intelligence, chipper and irreverent as only an ex-Rebel could be.

“In that case, Councilor, shall we allow Admiral Piett to proceed with his proposal?”

She smiled her warmest, sweetest, contradict-me-and-you’ll-wish-you’d-never-been-born-est smile. Fey’lya huffed and sat back. General Cracken snickered into his sleeve, and Piett cleared his throat. “As I was saying, I believe this arrangement offers practical benefits to the Republic fleet on the educational level,” he said. Carefully not catching Fey’lya’s eye, he continued, “I’ve also noted that your deployments to conflict zones in the Mid and Outer Rims have left coverage somewhat thin in the Core systems—”

General Cracken burst into gusts of laughter before Fey’lya could do more than sputter in indignation. “Damn, Admiral, you’ve done your homework! You’ve got a job in my office any time you like, sir.” He thumped the table.

“I’m honored, General,” said Piett, hoping that was not an enormous diplomatic faux pas. Fey’lya cast an imploring look at the Princess, who was now fighting a real smile.

General Madine cleared his throat, like a small mortar exploding. “If you’re proposing that we trust the defense of *any* sector to Darth Vader, Admiral Piett, you’d best think again. I think I speak for all of us on that.”

“I heartily concur with the general,” said Fey’lya hotly. Cracken snorted; apparently agreements between Fey’lya and Madine were an endangered species.

“Certainly not,” said Piett. “That would be a great deal to ask. However, the *Executor* has something to offer besides firepower. I propose to contract our available hangar space as a mobile launch and staging platform for starfighter squadrons. She can easily house twelve complete squadrons, complete with reserve ships and all necessary personnel, to provide quick-response coverage for the outer system here in Coruscant, thereby freeing up heavier hyper-capable forces for deployments.”

The military types in the room looked keenly interested; Cracken whistled, and Madine unbent so far as to hoist an eyebrow half a millimeter. Fey’lya looked very interested too, probably by the inference that the *Executor* herself would *not* be hyper-capable.

“A thought-provoking proposal, Admiral,” said the Princess. Her eyes smiled at him; just how much did she know about his little tiff with Vader? “But I have one question. We could, after all, insist on your ship’s surrender and put her to these uses as our own vessel. What is the advantage in allowing her to remain an Imperial naval vessel?”

Fey’lya thumped a hand on the table. “I second the President’s comment!”

“…there’s one you don’t hear every day,” Cracken was heard to mutter.

All eyes turned expectantly toward Piett, who would have felt very lonely at his end of the table if not for the warm encouragement in the Princess’ eyes, cheering him on. Hard as she played for her own team, she wanted him to win this one.

He cleared his throat. “Early this morning, I had the privilege of touring the Palace Mausoleum. Although many changes had taken place, the memorial dedicated to the men whom the Empire lost at Yavin remained. I’m told there was great pressure for that memorial to be demolished, given the number of innocent lives the Death Star claimed at Alderaan and elsewhere.”

At the mention of Alderaan the room went still. The Princess’ gaze rested on him in intently.

“That the New Republic was able even in its hour of triumph to acknowledge the losses of its enemies stands greatly to its credit. You have held true to the Rebellion’s ideals of freedom, even for those who fought against you.” He leaned forward on his elbows earnestly. “Aboard the *Executor* are three hundred thousand men who have served and suffered many years for a government in which they believed. Although it was not this government, I am hopeful that the spirit which could honor the men who served aboard the Death Star can respect our sacrifice as well.”

He crooked a little smile. “So in answer to your question, Your Excellency, I suppose there isn’t any advantage to the New Republic in acceding to my proposal…except the satisfaction of doing the right thing.”

Greatly to his surprise, the Princess laughed—not mockery, but a bright, devil-may-care merriment. Several old Alliance hands around the table joined in, even the intense Madine. Fey’lya gave a resigned sigh, kneading his eyebrows like the substitute teacher of an exceptionally rowdy class who knows what the joke is but thinks it’s stupid. “Ah, Admiral,” grinned General Cracken

by way of explanation. “*Now* you’re speaking Rebel!”

And from that point on, diplomacy was suddenly the easiest thing in the universe.

TBC

Chapter 11

With an expression of profound suspicion, the reflection in Piett's mirror reached up and tweaked the collar—fashionably cut, the Holonet ad had promised, but damn him if he could tell one way or the other—of the jacket it was wearing. It was a civilian jacket, made of Chandrilan suede (Chandrilan suede, the Princess' protocol droid assured him, was what the discerning humanoid gentleman was wearing this solar quarter). Piett had picked the soberest, grayest one he could find.

It wasn't sober or gray enough to suit him. He cast a longing glance at his uniform, hanging on the 'fresher wall rack; then turned his back on it firmly. This morning he was, for the first time in a quarter of a century, Off Duty.

Someone rapped on the bedroom door, and Piett turned to see Han Solo's well-honed *you've-got-to-be-kriffing-me* expression surveying him head to boots. "You're wearing *that*?"

"It's presentable." Piett aimed a pointed glance at Solo's scuffed jacket and stained trousers.

"Exactly. This place is in CoCo Town, you know that, right?"

Piett frowned. "I always understood the Collective Commerce district was reasonably safe. Should I bring a sidearm?"

Solo waved a hand. "Nah, it's not like it's the Southern Underground. It's just…blue-collar. Anything new's gonna stand out. I figure you'd rather avoid attention."

Meaning, of course, that *he'd* rather avoid attention. "I appreciate your concern," Piett said wryly. "But I'm afraid it's this or the uniform."

Solo pulled the kind of face Piett associated with new Destroyer captains who'd just discovered that the privilege of starship command consisted of one percent glorious interstellar warfare and ninety-nine percent interminable command meetings, byzantine political squabbles, submitting reports in triplicate, and placating impossible superiors. "That. *Definitely* that." He flicked his chin. "C'mon, morning traffic's gonna be hell if we don't get clear of Galactic City in five minutes."

Their speeder—best described as an extension of the Rebel *it-basically-works-so-who-cares-what-it-looks-like* aesthetic also responsible for orange flightsuits, the *Millennium Falcon,* and popular elections—was idling in the departure bay, alongside Solo's enormous Wookiee. He *oo-wralled* at Solo plaintively.

"Yeah, I hear you, but we can't go running Vader's admiral around in an open top, that's just asking for it."

"Wraaaaghhaaaaooo!"

"Look, I'll make it up to you. Leia's got a great chiropractor at the Alderaanian embassy."

The Wookiee *whumpfed* and folded itself with difficulty into the cramped passenger seat. Piett climbed in the back—next to the crossbow blaster the great hairy beast insisted on carting everywhere, *dear stars just tell me that safety catch is reliable*—and Solo took the helm.

"So," Solo drawled, weaving a path through the Palace District traffic lanes that had to be at least

sixty-five percent illegal, “Leia said you’re meeting your cousin at this joint, right?"

“Nephew.” The speeder bucked as they blasted across the exhaust wash of a passing city hoverbus. Piett clung to his armrest for dear life.

“Meant nephew,” grunted Solo. “J-something, isn’t it?”

“Justus. Justus Veritan.”

“Nervous?” Solo’s keen hazel eyes zeroed in on him via the rear-view reflector.

“Uncertain, perhaps.” *That we’ll get there alive.* “I’m not sure he’ll remember me. He was only four the last time I was able to visit Axxila.”

“When was that?”

“Three years before Endor. Just before I assumed command of—”

He clutched at the armrest again and reached up reflexively to hold down the cap he wasn’t actually wearing, as they swerved into oncoming traffic around a plodding trash hauler.

“Damn air-breathers,” Solo growled, and leaned out the window to yell, “*It’s called an accelerator!”*

The Wookiee whuffed.

“You said it, Chewie.” The speeder, demonstrating for the public benefit the operation of the thing called an accelerator, lurched clear across the quad-lane into the fork headed west toward CoCo Town. “So he’d’ve been seven when you all did your little vanishing number, yeah?” Solo went on casually, cutting up to the faster overhead lane and punching the forward thrusters. “That’s old enough. Believe me, you’d be amazed what kids remember. Course,” he reflected ruefully, “it’s usually the stuff you wish they’d forget.”

“I suppose I’ll have to take your word for it.” *And if that’s not the action of a desperate man, I don’t know what is.*

Negotiations had concluded two days ago, and the first thing the Princess had done was lift the communications embargo on the *Executor*’s crew—meaning he and his men could finally send messages out to their families and friends. Not two hours later, while he was still shaking hands at the post-summit reception, a call had been put through to the Princess from an old friend of hers who taught at Manarai University—and who also happened to be the dean of his nephew’s postgraduate program. Yesterday he and Justus had spoken for the first time by voice com, and had arranged to meet for breakfast.

Piett was rather wishing it could have been lunch instead—perhaps his stomach wouldn’t be pitching such a fit—but there was too much still to be done to get the *Executor* to Coruscant. His days were full to the gills, and he only had two left before he flew out to Kuat, where the New Republic was staging a team of hyperspace tractor ships to tow the lame Destroyer home.

You had to give the New Republic that much--once they got around to making a decision, they didn’t let the grass grow under their boots.

“Ah, I’m sure it’ll be fine,” said Solo. The speeder sliced a 70-degree angle dowm through six levels of traffic at a speed that did nothing for Piett’s nausea. “If he likes Dex’s he can’t be all bad.” He winked in the reflector.

“Apparently the entire galaxy has heard of this place except for me,” Piett grunted.

“Sure, everybody knows Dex’s. Famous local establishment.”

They swooped through a last sickening turn or three before coming to a stop in what Solo insisted was a private parking hangar and Piett suspected was a black market drop point, judging by the number of shady conversations being carried on in quiet corners and crates being trucked between speeders. A ten-minute walk brought them up to the famous local establishment in question. Piett would have described it as a famous local junk art installation—the original edifice appeared to be a converted mega-shipping container, now barely discernible under decades of city grime and tacked-on expansions in permacrete, corrugated durasteel, and repurposed ship hull panels—but the amount of traffic at the front door indicated it was, against all probability, as popular as Solo claimed. He squared his shoulders and marched in.

Inside the diner was mayhem and scuttling and hollering and grease. Piett could not see how a single tray was getting anywhere without being jostled or dropped or elbowed, let alone over a dozen waiters each carrying four or five trays at a go. Either every server in the joint was a Jedi, he decided, or six different sets of planetary physics were in operation. He tore his attention away from this marvel and tried to scan the jammed booths, though he probably wouldn’t recognize Justus even if—

“Number and-a species-a?”

Piett started and glanced down at what proved to be a Toydarian waitress, spectacularly temperamental for her size. Or possibly because of it. “I beg your pardon?”

“You plus-a those two”—she waved a claw contemptuously at Solo and his Wookiee—“anybody else-a in the party? You’ve been-a standing there for-a ages, find a seat-a.”

He began to apologize—for existing, he supposed—and actually had to remind himself that he was an *admiral* for stars’ sake, and what was more he was *Darth Vader*’s admiral, and therefore he was *not* about to be browbeaten by a *waitress.* “I am looking for—”

“Uncle Firmus!”

His gaze jumped past the aggressive little Toydarian. A gangly man had leapt out of his booth and was now forcing his way past the rush of bodies to seize Piett’s hand and pump it up and down like he was bailing out the rowboat his life depended on. “Stars, you look just like I remember! Well, older, obviously, but I suppose I do too, eh?”

Piett ventured an uncertain smile, trying to find a resemblance between this jocular stranger and the quiet but intelligent child he’d known. “You certainly do. I shouldn’t have known you at all.”

Justus laughed and ran a hand through his hair. “Wow. This is—*wow.* You’re standing right there and I still don’t think I believe it.”

Piett cast a bemused glance around the madhouse diner. “Do you know, I’m not sure I do either some days. It has been a surreal experience through and through.”

“I bet. It was all over the holofaxes, you know,” he added, leading Piett back to his booth. Piett cast a glance over his shoulder and saw Solo and the Wookiee already ensconced at the booth by the door, in spite of the fact that it had thirty seconds ago been occupied by a pack of Aqualish cab drivers. “I was in Chommel sector for research when it happened,” Justus chattered on, “didn’t hear a thing until I got out of the archives late one night and found Mother and Astria and Wesla and

everybody had tried to call me about fifty times."

His throat caught. "Wesla? Is she—"

"Oh!" He winced. "Guess I ought to start at the beginning. Wesla is my sister, she was born almost five years after—well, you know, after Endor. Big surprise for Mother, you can imagine. She and Father are getting on alright. He had an accident at the factory about ten years ago and can't get around much. Mother won't leave him alone for more than a day or two." He laughed, shaking his head again in bemusement. "She keeps saying it's all a hoax. I think she's scared of getting her hopes up. They wouldn't release any names, you know, except everyone knows about Vader obviously. But my program advisor here at U-Cor knows Princess Leia and I'd mentioned about you to her, so she found out you were—"

"You're-a ready to-a order-a?" The Toydarian was buzzing belligerently at their elbows, snout wrinkled in a scowl. "You been-a sittin' there for-a—"

Piett grabbed at a menu and speed-scanned it as Justus began, "Oh, er, yes, I'll have the Obi-Wonton Classic Platter, with the hermit crab salad on the side"—Piett gestured at him to stall a second longer—"and, uh, with ginger sauce on top, and…uh, I know it's not even nine in the morning, but what the hell, give me a Jinn Tonic. You want one, Uncle Firmus?"

"Why not," said Piett, who had guzzled starshine too many years to turn his nose up at proper booze any time of day.

"Two Jinn Tonics," said Justus.

"And-a you-a?" the Toydarian demanded of Piett.

"Er—one Skyguy Special for me," said Piett. "Well done, please."

The waitress sniffed contemptuously at him and zipped away.

"I understand you are studying for a graduate degree?" Piett asked, mopping his brow. He didn't remember civilian life being this stressful.

"My third, actually." Ah, there was something familiar—that sheepish grin. He'd had it from the cradle. "Father says I'm a hopeless bookworm, but he's stopped saying I'll amount to nothing, at least."

Piett smiled. His brother-in-law had been bred in the best old Axxilan blue-collar tradition, and held rigid views about the proper occupation of a man. He'd regularly scoffed at Firmus for his supposedly soft-handed life as a Navy officer.

Not after they gave him the *Executor* though. Gods, how proud he'd been when he first saw her long, sleek arrow shape in the construction slip at the Kuat Drive Yards. He'd known right away: no matter how his old mother wrung her hands, there'd never be any woman for him but the Lady.

"Three graduate degrees, that's quite an accomplishment. No doubt your father is proud. And I know your mother must be."

Justus grinned. "That she is."

"What have you studied?"

"Mostly pre-Imperial history and culture. I'm working on a thesis right now in intercultural conflict

resolution, which is what sent me to Chommel sector. I'm on Naboo studying the relationship between the native human and Gungan populations."

Piett blinked. "However did you come to be studying *Gungans*?"

"It was my advisor's idea, actually. She used to represent Chommel Sector, back before the Emperor dissolved the Senate, and actually her aunt was the one who—listen to me, I'm rambling, you can't possibly want to know all that."

Piett smiled. "A bit out of my bailiwick, perhaps."

"Maybe you'd better not ask about me," Justus said ruefully, "otherwise I'll be off again before you can say *Trade Federation*."

"Why don't you tell me about your sisters?"

"Astria's married, she and her husband have an investment firm. Wesla's at university. She keeps threatening to transfer to the Reserve Officer Candidate program and go Navy."

He liked Wesla already, and not just because the W in *Firmus W. Piett* stood for *Weslerman.* "Threatening? May I take it your parents disapprove?"

"Well," Justus hedged. "Not so much they don't approve. But I think Mother's afraid of another letter coming home." He dropped his voice, grinning conspiratorially. "That and she says the New Republic Defense Force isn't a patch on the old Imperial Navy."

Piett's smile came with a profound pang in his chest. When he'd visited home before going out to take command of the *Executor*, Carilla had insisted on sewing his new insignia bars on all his uniforms herself, never mind that the household droid could have done it cheaper and faster. There had been days—whole months, in fact—during that hellish hunt for Skywalker, when nothing but the memory of her pride in him had kept him from resigning his commission. What she must have felt, one morning after Endor, when the archaic letter arrived, with that stiff *regret to inform you* and little more… He should have tried to contact her the minute he got back into known space. Communications embargo be damned, she didn't deserve one minute of grief more than—

"What about you?" Justus was looking at him curiously now, testing out uncertain waters.

"What about me?"

"Well, I assume it must all have been a shock. You know, the Empire being gone and all this going on." He waved his hand to indicate the New Republic busily republicking all around them. "What do you think of it?"

"I don't wish to form opinions prematurely. I've barely experienced it." He glanced around again at the foreign-feeling diner. "I imagine it will be…a steep learning curve, at least in some areas."

Justus met this with respectful silence for a moment or two. "Have you made any plans?"

"I expect I'll have my hands full for quite some time, getting the *Executor* to Coruscant and sorting out the details of our new operational rhythm."

"Aren't you going to come home to Axxila?"

Piett toyed with a napkin resignedly. "I should like to, Justus, but I don't know when it will be possible. I doubt Lord Vader will approve my leave of absence during the transition." That, and he

didn’t plan on asking Vader for anything else for, oh, another twenty-eight years probably.

Justus sat back, wide-eyed. “Stars. I forgot about *him*.”

“Would that I had the luxury,” said Piett dryly.

“Well, maybe we can figure out a way to visit you here,” Justus said, choosing the path of optimism. “At the very least we’ve got to set up a holocom call for Mother. She misses you something awful, you know.”

His throat burned. “I should like that very much, Justus.”

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tbc

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

> Contrary to observable evidence, I'm not in fact dead and neither is this fic. I apologize for making snails, tectonic plates, and dialup internet look like speed demons by comparison and, if you are in fact still reading this, I also thank you for your patience. I wish I could promise you won't have a use for said patience anymore where this fic is concerned; but what I can promise is that I finish what I start, even if I do not exactly invite comparisons to Usain Bolt in the process. Hope that you enjoy the below :D

"Glad to be putting Coruscant behind you?"

Piett grimaced, still shaking out his fingers. "Very much so." If he had to shake one more claw, paw, fin, or hand ever again it'd be too soon. But the last toast had been drunk, the last Senate budget subcommittee meeting endured, the last job proposal from Airen Cracken dodged, the last dig from Borsk Fey'lya gritted out; in less than twenty-four hours he'd be in Kuat, rendezvousing with the task force of escort cruisers and hyperspace tow ships, and in four days he'd have good solid dreadnought decking under his boots again. Provided, of course, it hadn't fallen victim to some Skywalker-induced catastrophe before he got back to Eriadu.

A wicked glint lit up Mara's lethal green eyes. "Shame you'll be back in less than two weeks then."

Piett pulled a disgusted face, and she cracked an equally wicked smile. "There, there. Leia tells me you did very well for not being a diplomat."

"High praise coming from Her Highness."

"Mm. She likes you. And I don't think she's *ever* liked an Imperial naval officer." Mara narrowed her eyes at the ramp, beyond which the Princess and assorted senior members of the New Republic government who had come to see him off—with considerably more pomp and circumstance than he personally cared for—could be seen leaving the landing pad, returning to the Palace complex. "Except Gilad Pellaeon, and that cost him one intergalactic peace treaty and an Alderaanian moss painting worth millions of credits. What did *you* do?"

"I, ah…I told her I would be proud to make my application for New Republic citizenship upon our return to Coruscant."

Mara raised one eyebrow at him as she hit the retraction key for the landing ramp. "Not a bad play, Admiral. Not bad at all."

"I was perfectly sincere." He felt his hackles rise a little. A career carved out amid the cutthroat

backroom politics of the Imperial Navy had not trained him in honest gestures, and despite all the practice Skywalker and the Princess and their fellow old-school Rebel types had given him, they still made him feel clumsy and vulnerable. "She's shown herself to be a leader worth following in every respect."

Mara, surprisingly, offered an apologetic smile. "So she has. Nasty suspicious mind I've got." The wicked smirk once more. "And just think, this is *after* five years being married to Farmboy. Imagine what I *used* to be like."

"I try not to," Piett said sincerely.

"For the best, believe me. Let's get this show on the road. Stow your kit, you've got a few minutes while the preflight checks finish."

"Same cabin?" Piett asked, hefting his bags again.

"No, you'll be in the captain's quarters. I'll bunk with Ben."

Bags scattered themselves across the deckplates. "Ah—beg pardon—will young Ben be joining us for the flight?"

She pinned him with a raised eyebrow. "Problem?"

"Er—no—I suppose I just assumed—I mean—not at all, certainly." Her other eyebrow moved towards her hairline, watching him fumble his bags back in order. "I—well, it's just I don't really have much experience with children."

"About time you got some then. Don't you have a passel of nieces and nephews back home?" She flipped her chin down the corridor. "Second hatch on the right."

"*They're* all adults," Piett grumbled to himself, collecting his hovercase and lumbering down to his quarters. He paused a moment in the hatch, disgruntlement fading as he took in the cabin and its handful of personal touches—a holo of Luke and Mara on a magshelf above the double-wide bunk, looking windblown and (in Mara's case) rather sunburnt in a desert, and another holo running through clips of little Ben; an old flight helmet stamped with the Rebellion's red firebird emblem racked on the bulkhead; the keelplate of another ship bolted to the back of the cabin hatch, with the name *Jade's Fire* in hand-drawn Aurebesh characters. Five minutes and a small crate would have sufficed to pack it all up. Either Jade still subscribed to the Empire's minimalist aesthetic, or Skywalker had inherited his father's ascetic inclinations, or both. He nodded approvingly.

The locker was none too big, and it took some experimenting to get everything in. Besides the hovercase holding his dress uniforms and assorted diplomatic presents he had his duffel, satchel, a few briefcases of flimsiwork and datachips, a whole case of aged Whyren's which had been a welcome-home gift from the ambassador for the Imperial Remnant to the *Executor*'s command officers—and last but not least, the item the Princess had handed to him at the very last second. It was, she'd said nonchalantly, a message for Vader from somebody called Mos Espa, just an ordinary security cylinder about the size of a lightsaber sealed with a biometric lock; but the way she'd held it told him it held something of great significance. He stowed it in the very center of the locker, braced securely between other cases, then sealed the lid down and straightened up, massaging his protesting lower back.

"Admiral?" Mara's steps sounded down the corridor a moment before her head arrived through the cabin hatch. "We're about to"—she leaned out again, looking suspiciously behind herself down the corridor, and then mouthed *take off.*

"Is that classified information?"

She gestured down the corridor with her chin. "Suffice it to say you don't want to see what would happen if he finds out someone not him is flying this thing."

Piett's eyebrows jumped toward his cap brim. "Already?" he blurted.

"Skywalker genes. Also the fact that Luke lets him 'help' any time he flies." She flicked her fingers in a gesture the Solo children had instructed him was called 'air quotes'.

"I see."

"But fortunately"—Piett didn't think he liked that smile—"*you* know all about managing the Skywalker assumption that they are the center of the spaceborne universe. Think you can distract him until I get us into hyperspace?"

"I'll do my best." How hard could it be?

"Fair warning," Mara continued, leading the way back down the corridor, "he's been playing here all morning, so disaster is not too strong a word."

She hit the hatch control leading to the passenger lounge.

"Mama!" A small redheaded boy bounced to his feet and launched across the lounge—straight through the greatest concentration of naval firepower that Piett had seen since Endor. Five model Star Destroyers, seven or eight Mon Calamari cruisers, a couple of Corellian corvettes, a disproportionately huge replica of the *Millennium Falcon*, sundry customized yachts and freighters, and whole squadrons' worth of starfighters, mostly X-wings.

So much for minimalism.

"Solo started it," Mara said, "and now everyone we know thinks it's a competition. Kid's going to wind up owning his own actual Death Star before he hits puberty."

"Mama!" Ben rounded the last Destroyer flotilla and hurtled like a proton torpedo into Mara's legs. "Az pay wis Achoo! Az—"

He devolved into busy toddler-chatter that Piett quickly realized he did not stand any chance of comprehending. Instead he craned his head to get a better look at the innocent, whimsical, *tiny* individual in whose person prowled the genomes of Darth Vader. So far they seemed to be achieving perfect incognito.

Ben caught him staring and returned the favor, throwing a chubby pointed finger into the bargain. "Mama, az *dat*?"

"That's Admiral Piett." Mara produced what appeared to be someone's sock from her pocket and bent over to mop up his snotty nose. "Can you say hello?"

The boy hid half his face in her trousers instead, in what Piett could already see was feigned shyness; his enormous grey eyes had much the same cheerful, inquiring spark that Skywalker's did.

"Ben Owen Skywalker," said Mara sternly. Guilt played comically over his impish countenance. "You need to be polite. Say hello."

Ben ducked his face further into her legs. "Addo."

"Hello, young man. Pleased to make your acquaintance." On a whim Piett doffed his cap, and was rewarded with a bright giggle. "Have you been helping your mother get the ship ready to fly?"

Ben abandoned all pretensions to timidity. "Az fy payship wis Mama an' Achoo! Az hep Mama—" The explanation dissolved into a gush of incomprehensible syllables and mysterious gesticulations.

"He certainly has," said Mara. "This morning, for instance, he washed all of Mommy's socks in the 'fresher bowl."

"Did he," said Piett. *Note to self: keep cabin hatch firmly locked at all times.*

"And then put them all over my bed to dry," she continued, "for which I blame his father, who showed him how he 'does laundry' on the Lady."

Ben, bored of all this adult conversation above his head, hung from her knees imploringly. "Uz pay fy, Mama?"

"Mommy has to work for a little bit. Why don't you play with Uncle Piett?"

"*Uncle* Piett?" stammered the newly-christened addition to the Skywalker clan.

"Don't tell me you're scared of the competition."

"Well," said Piett. "When you put it that way."

Ben surveyed him up and down with much the same *impress me, if you can* attitude Piett remembered from the day he'd met Vader. "Uz fy payships, Unca Peet?"

"I believe I can, so to speak, wing it." Forty years in the Navy had to be good for a few transferrable skills.

Mara's slight smile might have meant anything. "If it gets too interesting, ping me on the intercom. Safety harness seating on that bulkhead." The hatch whooshed shut behind her. Piett eyed it for a nervous moment before berating himself for a coward and finding a spot on the carpet. Ben instantly pushed a fistful of starfighters at him.

"Das Unca Wedz," he chattered, pointing out an X-wing with a black semicircle painted on its prow. "An das Unca Hobbie"—a long hash-marked stripe—"an das Unca Taco"—calligraphy of some kind, maybe Alderaanian—"an az not pay wis Unca Wez." He pointed at the overhead, where yet another X-wing model hung from a short cable. Piett squinted at it, curiously.

Ah. "Unca Wez" was inordinately fond of scantily clad females.

There was an insistent yank on his sleeve. Piett looked down and nearly impaled an eyeball on the prow of yet another X-wing.

"Dis Dada!" The fighter jerked impetuously in Ben's waving fist and, had Piett not dodged to the left, would have drilled his left nostril cavity a full centimeter deeper than designed by nature.

He steadied Ben's hand so as to get a good look. This X-wing had a large fragmented circle marked on it—that must be a kill badge representing the first Death Star, so perhaps the mysterious "Unca Wedz" and his semicircle had contributed to the demise of the second—and a little blue-and-white

astromech picked out in loving detail. "I see, and a fine ship it is too."

"Az fy payship!"

Ben plopped down, held out the X-wing, and the tiny ship took flight, hovering six inches over his chubby palm. "Uz doot," he ordered, pointing a hereditary forefinger at his playmate.

Piett picked up "Unca Taco"—no wonder the child hadn't batted an eye at the notion of "Unca Peet", uncles were obviously a decicred a dozen in his world—and flipped it over, looking for the power switch. "Odd," he said to himself after a moment. "Does this one not have repulsors built in?"

Something twittered the electronic equivalent of a snigger behind him, and Piett twisted round. In a corner of the cabin beside the hatch, where it had escaped his line of sight until now, an old but well-maintained astromech droid was hooked up to a charging station. Its coloration matched the droid in Ben's model.

"Achoo!" Ben screeched, and pointed at Piett. "Daz Unca Peet!"

The idea of making introductions in the other direction as well did not occur to him, but then they weren't really necessary. "You," Piett said to it accusingly, "can only be Artoo-Detoo."

For an entity without proper appendages, the droid did a remarkable impression of Solo's Corellian salute.

"You nearly got me killed at Bespin. I still can't believe Lord Vader didn't strangle us all."

Exactly how the *Falcon*'s crewhad managed to diagnose what Piett had considered a quite sly bit of sabotage in time to hyper out of the Empire's clutches was one of many skin-of-the-teeth escapes Skywalker had demystified for them during his stay aboard the Lady, and by no means the only one to have hinged on the devious talents of his obsolete astromech Artoo-Detoo. Piett—though, come to think of it, not Lord Vader—had been greatly nonplussed. Being bested by a twenty-something Rebel with supernatural arcane powers was frustrating enough; losing to said Rebel's infernal mechanical sidekick was downright insulting.

The diminutive devil in question blatted something that resembled an apology in much the same way Lord Vader resembled a plushy toy.

Ben pushed impatiently at Piett's hands. "Uz *doot,* Unca Peet!"

"I'm trying," Piett told him.

"Az not ty," Ben said severely. "Az doot."

"Quoting Jedi proverbs already, I see." Piett turned over the toy fighter in quest of a repulsor switch. "Won't your grandfather be *delighted*."

The astromech twittered. Piett shot it a stern look. "As long as you're sitting there amusing yourself at my expense, perhaps you could help me find the repulsors on this." He held up "Unca Taco."

He hadn't really expected any help—it gave a certain impression of being a one-man droid—but a string of chatter blasted back at him. Piett held up a hand. "Wait, wait, one moment"—he dug out his datapad. "My binary was never all that good. May I?"

The astromech condescended to be hooked up to the pad, and a moment later text flowed onto the

screen. *REPEAT OBJECTIVE STATEMENT: the toy does not possess repulsion mechanisms.*

Piett looked back at the ship still bobbing over Ben's shoulder. "But that one—"

Patience at an end, Ben flung a hand out, and the fighter in Piett's fingers jerked like a live thing. Astonished, Piett let go and watched it swoop in a shaky circle, weaving back around to his hand. "*Uz* doot," Ben insisted.

Piett stared in amazement, first at Ben and then at Artoo-Detoo. Who, for not having a face, was making an enormously smug one.

PROCEDURAL RECOMMENDATION: Tell him he must apply the same interface protocol as when playing with UNIT: HUMAN: HAN SOLO or UNIT: HUMAN: WEDGE ANTILLES.

Piett's eyebrows scrunched in the effort to parse this suggestion; but it seemed Ben understood some binary already, at least enough to catch the names. His thunderous little brow cleared in comprehension. "Uz fy payship az *dis*," he pronounced, and with great gravity of countenance proceeded to move Piett's arm for him, as if this was not the sort of activity that came naturally to most people. "Dis *a'ten* fy."

"Ah." Piett zoomed the X-wing experimentally. "*Pretend* flying. What an original imagination you have, young man."

Artoo-Detoo chirruped. *OBSERVATION: Welcome to the Skywalker sideshow. THEORETICAL STATEMENT: It is probable that UNIT: HUMAN: BEN SKYWALKER also believes that the Force is how real ships fly.*

Piett glanced back at little Ben, who was now the hub of a four-starfighter orbital system. "I didn't realize these, ah, talents could manifest at such a young age."

CALCULATION: Observed activities approximately 62.6% attributable to uploads of new operating instructions, most often by PRIMARY: LUKE SKYWALKER and PRIMARY: MARA JADE SKYWALKER.

Piett frowned, half his thoughts occupied with translating the curious metaphors into something understandable, the other half observing that this unit had to be decades overdue for a memory wipe. "You mean they teach him to do this?"

QUALIFICATION: Observed activities approximately 37.4% attributable to innate coding.

"He...does it instinctively?"

Affirmative. SUPPORTING EVIDENCE: 1: His gyroscopic and navigational functions are not prone to error, contrary to observed humanoid averages. 2: He locates objects without visual reference. 3: He is equipped with sensors for detecting unquantifiable data input, such as [thoughts] and [feelings]. 3a: When he detects high-intensity readings for these data he often experiences system overloads.

Abnormally good physical coordination, knew where things were without seeing them, could sense people's emotions and had meltdowns when they were too intense for him. He might be getting the hang of this droid lingo. "It must be very challenging to raise a child with such abilities."

OBSERVATION: You wouldn't believe the tantrums.

"Oh," Piett said, with a perfectly straight face, "I think I would."

Artoo chittered wicked amusement. *RECALCULATION: Good point.*

"Unca Peet!" Something sharp-cornered and metal dug into his kneecap, dragging his focus back down. Ben was proudly exhibiting yet another starfighter. It was—good gods, it was a homemade x1 Interceptor, pieced together out of parts scavenged from other models and possibly a few comlink components. There was even a little Imperial crest on the cockpit hatch.

"Dis Gampa," Ben informed him. "Az make uz!"

Piett exchanged skeptical looks with Artoo. "You made it all by yourself?"

Ben gave this some thought. "Az make uz wis Dada an' Mama."

MEMORY LOG REPORT: Model starfighter was constructed during holo call from PRIMARY: LUKE SKYWALKER on 12.13.25 precisely 26.88 standard days ago. PRIMARY: LUKE SKYWALKER provided instructions for materials and assembly.

"Ah," said Piett. "Your father called and showed you and your mother how to build the ship."

MEMORY LOG REPORT: I soldered the wings on.

"Az see Dada on commink," Ben said gravely. "Az cuz Dada go pay wis Gampa."

While Piett involuntarily explored the intriguing question of whether a human lung could be ejected directly through the nostrils, Artoo chuttered impudently. *ASSESSMENT: That is a correct assessment of their interactions.*

Piett glared at him. "You're not helping. He can read minds at this distance, you know."

QUALIFICATION: But not circuits. CONCLUSION: That's your problem.

"Uz Dada pay fy wis Gampa?" Ben chirped.

"Please the gods not with *my* ship," Piett muttered. Lord Vader might be a pilot par excellence, but he had a certain distressing tendency to assume that every craft he got his hands on was, more or less, a TIE fighter.

Ben clambered to his feet and pointed at Piett's face. "*Uz* pay fy wis Gampa, Unca Peet?"

"Er—well, I suppose after a manner of speaking, yes."

ASSESSMENT: So that's what took you so long in the Unknown Regions.

"I can't understand how you've gone this long without someone dumping you at a recycling center," Piett told it.

"*Az* pay fy wis Gampa?"

Piett winced. "Oh. Ah…"

CALCULATION: Facial analysis indicates 73% probability that negative answer may initiate a system overload.

"And have you considered what a *positive* answer may initiate?" Piett hissed, flicking a thumb toward the hatch. Though she clearly had a high tolerance for risk—she must, to have married into this family of daredevils—he couldn't see Mara Jade happily scheduling play dates for her not-

even-two-year-old and his despotic Sith Lord grandfather. He had no idea whether they planned to introduce the child to Vader at all; the man could give adults nightmares just standing there and breathing, let alone impressionable younglings. Especially younglings who, per Artoo's claim of a moment ago, were extremely sensitive to negative emotions, something Darth Vader was probably generating at hurricane force 90% of the time.

Artoo shifted anxiously on his treads. *PROCEDURAL RECOMMENDATION: Stall.*

Piett shot another hopeful glance toward the hatch, but no Mara appeared for him to pass the buck to, and he could still feel the vibration of sublight engines and a faint gravitational pressure. Several minutes yet to hyper. He looked back down and was met with a budding scowl suggestive of increasing impatience and homicidal ancestry. "Well...I don't know."

Not so easily was the descendant of Darth Vader satisfied. "Az cuz why?"

Piett cast about him helplessly. How did one translate this sort of thing into toddler-size terminology? "Because...because Grandpa might not want to play flying."

An Orinthic nun at a Hutt strip club could not have produced a more scandalized expressions than Ben did. He clearly held it as a truth self-evident and universal that no sentient being could aspire to any greater joy than to play flying. "Az cuz *why*?"

Piett tried to swallow the pittin that suddenly seemed to be squirming in his throat. He'd pitied the three Solo children, so young and naive to be saddled with such a dark and brutal relative—but innocent little Ben, who'd never imagined anything more terrible than perhaps one of his toy ships breaking, how could he even begin to understand? "Well, Ben, I—I can't really—"

Artoo interrupted with an urgent, melancholy wail. *MEMORY LOG REPORT: Prior to 19BBY, PRIMARY: ANAKIN SKYWALKER smiled 73% more frequently when engaged in flight activities. MEMORY LOG REPORT: PRIMARY: ANAKIN SKYWALKER experienced a severe malware infection | darth-vader | in 19BBY which caused extensive corruption of his operating system files, required extensive hardware reconstruction, and overwrote his unit designation. CONCLUSION: Present response to flight activities not predictable.*

"Just one moment," Piett sputtered at it. "You *knew* Lord Vader before—"

Ben tugged insistently at Piett's kneecaps. "Az Achoo say?"

"He says—he says that your grandfather became very sad a long time ago, and he might not be better yet. How did *you* know Lord Vader before—"

"Az sad?" pressed Ben.

Artoo screeched disapproval at this translation. *MEMORY LOG REPORT: Primary behaviors expressed by PRIMARY: ANAKIN SKYWALKER [alt: darth-vader] between 19BBY and 4ABY are anger and aggression!*

"Yes," Piett said stubbornly, glaring at the astromech. "Very sad. And *sometimes,* because he is so sad, he gets angry."

Artoo made a rude noise. Piett glanced at the datapad and hastily covered it, in case Ben's precocity extended to reading.

But Ben was busy turning over his toy TIE Interceptor with surprisingly thoughtful eyes. "Az cuzzer bey bamman make uz?"

Piett frowned. "Beg pardon—what?"

Ben frowned too. "Az bey *bey* bamman. Az make uz sad?"

Piett sighed and turned to Artoo. "I don't suppose *you* know what he's talking about?"

CLARIFICATION: He is querying if the Very Bad Man made PRIMARY: ANAKIN SKYWALKER "sad."

The last word was accentuated with a decidedly crude *blatt*. Piett scowled, and had to remind himself he was not addressing a sentient being but a piece of programming with a seriously under-serviced personality subroutine. Somehow it was hard to believe. "And who is this Very Bad—good gods!"

The half-meter-tall face of the Emperor had materialized amid the reproduction of his lost fleet, scowling none too benevolently at Piett as if holding him personally responsible for its destruction at Endor. Artoo twittered and rescaled the projection to full-body at the same height, which helped, but not much. Ben squealed at once. "Az bey bamman!"

"I see," said Piett sourly. "*That* very bad—"

He stopped dead, rather the way Mara just had in the hatch. He hadn't even felt the ship make the jump. Looking into her slitted poison-green eyes, he doubted he'd ever feel it come out of hyperspace either; never had the phrase *mad as a mother gundark* looked less metaphorical.

Piett tried out the words *This is not what it looks like* in his head, and wondered how he could make them sound more convincing.

"History lesson?" Mara purred.

Piett swallowed. "Of a sort." Privately he vowed that, unless he was spaced out the airlock in the next five minutes, he would seize the first available opportunity to kick Artoo-Detoo in the motivators.

"Mama! Az bey bamman!" Ben was waving a pudgy hand through the imperial countenance.

"Yes," growled Mara, lethal green gaze zeroed on Piett like a pair of Death Stars. "He was a very, *very* bad man."

Piett felt it was not the time to be making remarks on the complexities of differing intergalactic political philosophies, the frequently subjective nature of personal opinions, and the practical application of moral codes. The Emperor might be dead, but that was no reason *he* had to be.

Ben scampered into the center of the cabin, arms flung wide to include all listeners organic and mechanical in what he seemed to consider a supremely urgent announcement. "Unca Peet az say bey bamman make Gampa sad!"

"*Sad*?"

Artoo blooped something smug, but Piett decided he might as well go down guns blazing. "Sad," he repeated stubbornly. "And *sometimes*—"

Ben bobbed his head up and down with all the excitement of a scientist discovering a new natural law. "Gampa az like Mama! Bey bamman az make uz bey sad!"

Piett blinked in total surprise; then realization dawned, and he looked at the woman who'd been the Emperor's Hand. She stood quite still for several seconds, expression inscrutable. Then she came and knelt beside Ben, staring at the projection. "Yes. The Very Bad Man made Mommy very sad too, once."

"Az angy?"

"Yes. Very sad and very angry." Her hand caressed Ben's hair, and old ghosts stirred in her eyes. "The Very Bad Man took Grandpa away and taught him to do very bad things, just like Mommy."

Artoo cooed sadly.

"But when Daddy found us, he helped us remember how bad the Very Bad Man was. And he helped make us happy again."

She spoke in measured, almost reverent tones, and Piett understood—it was not a simple story, but a sacred catechism, a legacy to be unpacked a little more each year as Ben grew in understanding. He'd wondered what someone as generous and trusting and luminous as Skywalker could possibly have seen to love in the caustic, pessimistic, and—well, *jaded* Emperor's Hand. But perhaps at core they were not so different. Both bared themselves to their worst demons for the sake of those they loved. Both held themselves to the highest standard of personal courage, and even now, were teaching it to their son.

Of course, as far as said son was currently concerned, this was all just first-rate entertainment. "Dada make bamman go 'way!"

"Yes. The Very Bad Man went away forever and ever."

"*Az* make bamman go 'way!" Ben swung his pudgy fists at the projection, making up in enthusiasm what he lacked in accuracy and coordination. Artoo whistled exuberantly, and made the projection dart left, right, waver, tumble onto the carpet, and finally wink out under the stomping of tiny bare feet. Ben flung his arms up in a sort of victory dance. "Bamman go 'way! Az make Mama happy!"

Piett probably shouldn't be grinning at the spectacle of his sworn monarch's likeness being trampled to death by a toddler, but found he couldn't help it. Artoo made the astromech equivalent of a snicker.

Mara swept him up in both arms and hugged him tightly, perhaps to conceal a suspicious glimmering in her eyes. "Yes, you make Mommy very, *very* happy."

Ben squirmed, waving his model TIE interceptor. "Az make Gampa happy?"

Mara ran a gentle hand through his hair. "Well, you'll have to wait and find out when you see him."

"Az see Gampa?"

"Soon, Ben. Very soon."

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tbc

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

> Another long delay, another groveling apology from the reprehensible author, you know the drill. Same reason as usual—I had difficulty bringing this to a place that I was satisfied with. I can only hope that the result is worth the wait. On the plus side, I'm learning all kinds of lovely tricks to write myself out of a corner, and if you care to know, what finally worked this time was rewriting from another character's POV in order to understand what should happen better. I'm open to posting the b-version of the scene separately if anyone expresses an interest in seeing it.
>
> We are approaching the end now, sad to say. I estimate there are 1-2 chapters and an epilogue to go, always assuming my current scheme holds.
>
> Credit where credit is due: some content in this chapter is borrowed from the EU novel *Tatooine Ghosts*.

"Welcome back, sir!"

Venka seized Piett's hand and pumped it like a man trying to bail out a sinking rowboat. Piett cast sharp looks at the rest of the side party assembled to welcome him back to the *Executor*.

She'd *looked* like she was still a going concern, as much as he'd been able to see of her on the shuttle hop over from the *Fidelity*. Appearances, of course, could be deceiving.

"Thank you, Captain," he said, extracting his slightly numb fingers. "It's good to be back." Whatever had Venka in a dither, it almost certainly began with a Darth and ended with a Vader… unless, of course, it began with a Luke and ended with a Skywalker. Or, gods help them all, *both of them at once.*

Well, if there was anything he'd learned in thirty years under Lord Vader, it was that there was no point paying for trouble before it came due.

"I trust," he lied through his teeth, "you experienced no serious difficulties in my absence?"

Venka's smile looked rather on the wan side. "All as well as can be expected, sir."

Wonderful. I can see I'm not needed here. "Wonderful! I can see I'm not needed here!"

Forced smiles and painfully obligatory laughter ensued. Piett cast a regretful glance toward the puffing young New Republic ensign pushing a hovercart full of his baggage out of the shuttle. Ever since about four hours into the jump to Kuat, when the threat of naptime had prompted Ben to stage an impressive dramatization of the phrase *tempest in a teacup* complete with whirling airborne debris, he'd nursed fond hopes of unwinding for an hour or two in his own quarters with a well-deserved glass of the fifty-year Hapan blue cane rum that Airen Cracken had given him as a parting bribe. But when one allowed two Skywalkers free rein of one's ship for a standard month,

Consequences Ensued.

Someday, he thought wistfully. Surely he'd earn a decent rest *someday*.

"Well, gentlemen, I shan't keep you from your duties any longer. We shall have a great deal of preparation ahead of us if we're to make the scheduled jump window. Captain, if you'll come with me and bring me up on our status?"

"Of course, sir."

"And Lieutenant Ghors, if you would direct the ensign to my quarters with the luggage—ah, excepting this." He fished quickly in the topmost locker and extracted the Princess' security case. Though she hadn't said anything about its being an urgent message, delay was never advisable where Lord Vader's paternal sensibilities were involved; so he tucked the capsule into his uniform chest pocket and proceeded with Venka to the turbolifts, the rest of the men hanging respectfully back for the next lift. The car hatch had barely sealed itself before Piett cleared his throat.

"Alright—what's he up to?"

"Er…not much, sir."

Piett reached out and pressed the brake, jolting them both slightly. "Venka, how long have you and I known Lord Vader?"

Venka shifted nervously. "Ah—nearly thirty years, sir."

"And when, in all that time, has he *ever* been up to 'not much'?"

Venka clung to increasingly precarious calm. "Well, of course he's *busy,* sir—but—it isn't anything mission-critical, I assure you."

Piett did not care for that pleading tone. "*What* isn't mission-critical?"

"Well, the—but you must understand, I did *try*, sir, truly, ask Ghors, but—it's not as though I stood a chance against *both* of them, is it? I'm sure you can requisition another one…somewhere…"

"Venka, stop *blathering* and tell me what's going on."

Venka gathered himself again and shook his head grimly. "You'll see, sir." He keyed a new destination into the car's control panel and deactivated the brake. Three minutes later they stepped out into the corridor leading into the old black ops hangar. Piett peered out into it as they passed the deck-level observation windows toward the entrance, and a beat later stopped in his tracks.

"Sir?"

"Master Skywalker's yacht is gone."

Venka backtracked and followed his gaze to the empty pad beside Vader's lambda shuttle. "Odd. I thought they had another test flight scheduled in a few minutes."

Piett's gaze glazed over for a spellbound moment of pure, unalloyed dread. "*Test* flight?"

Venka looked guilty as hell. "I—I did *want* to warn you, sir, but Lord Vader insisted that it was, er…a surprise."

"A surprise."

Shuffling. “Yes, sir.”

Piett pinched the bridge of his nose. “Damn him and his damned *surprises*—”

“Admiral.”

If he had had a laser measure handy, he could have proven that Venka’s boots actually left the deckplates by a fraction of a millimeter. Firmus W. Piett, however, was not going to give Darth Kriffing Vader the satisfaction if it bloody well killed him.

He turned at the most leisurely pace he could without being accused of disrespect or a guilty conscience. Vader was looming practically on their heels, one thumb stuck in his belt, a double-length hydrospanner hanging in his free hand, and a smug-as-hell expression somehow superimposed on his mask.

“My lord. I see you’ve been keeping your hand in.”

Venka made a borderline-supersonic squeak of dismay. He had never figured out that this was (usually) just one of Vader’s games. The man liked a challenge, and if he could give himself one while simultaneously upending his subordinates’ assumptions about how sneaky a bastard a two-meter, hundred-and-twenty kilo, respirator-reliant force of nature could be, so much the better.

“You are late,” he boomed, nearly skewering Piett with the hydrospanner. “You received approval for a two-standard-week temporary duty assignment. It has been over twice that length of time.”

Venka’s face went whiter than one of the Princess’ dresses, but Piett just clasped his hands behind his back and projected the aggressive imperturbability that used to leave Ozzel frothing at the mouth. “Yes, sir. Regrettably the negotiations took rather longer than we—”

“You will notice,” Vader boomed over top of him, still wagging the hydrospanner at Piett’s nose, “that I have commanded this ship for *four* consecutive weeks without your assistance.”

Piett enforced his straight face with difficulty. Nice though it was to have this proof that Vader was pleased—alright, less than completely indifferent—to see him despite their little tiff, he had his dignity to maintain. “I only hope it wasn’t too taxing, sir.”

“*Taxing*.” Vader contrived by inflection alone to evoke the image of a health and safety inspector who had just discovered a severed human appendage in his Giju stew. “*You* may find it taxing to maintain the elevated standards I have instituted in your absence.”

“No doubt, sir.” He eyed the hydrospanner. “All while still finding time for side projects, I see.”

“Indeed,” said Vader. “Since executing the duties of commander occupied a mere thirty percent of the regular duty shift. One wonders what it is *you* do with the remaining time.”

He swooped past, cape flagging out magnificently in his wake. Piett glanced at Venka and found the captain’s face performing a complicated cubist ballet of terror and bewilderment. Taking pity on the man, he cleared his throat.

“That will be all, Captain. I shall debrief Lord Vader and join you on the bridge shortly.”

While Venka retreated in the turbolift, Piett followed Vader into the hangar—and stopped dead in his tracks. Docked next door to Vader’s shuttle, there was now an additional lambda—Hull Number Delta Three Aurek Aurek, to be precise, otherwise known as Shuttle *Incomium*. A fact which he knew because *it washis shuttle.*

Or rather, it had been.

His shuttle, all of it but the actual hull, was now the enormous tottering pyramid of cannibalized engine components, wires, bolts, struts, illumination nodes, hoses, cables, conduits, panels, insulation, gaskets, fuses, tanks, switches, housings, pipes, lube cans, grating, struts, fuel lines, entire dorsal foil assembly, racks, washers, magnetic seal kits, panels, and one enormous securing wingnut labeled in reflective neon orange characters *DANGER STRUCTURAL SUPPORT ELEMENT DO NOT DETACH* situated three meters on the wrong side of the safe working radius dictated by Imperial Navy safety regulations. Looking at it gave Piett the distinct sensation that a suction pump was slurping every milliliter of blood out of his cardiovascular system. Somehow he managed to stagger around to the shuttle's aft, where Lord Vader was feeding the double-length hydrospanner into the sublight engine exhaust valve, right past the prismatic yellow warning sticker and its graphic diagram of a limb being severed.

Why in hells couldn't the man have picked *any of the other fifty shuttles on this ship* to eviscerate?

"I see you've been, ah, productive, sir."

"More than can be said for your service crew," said Vader, still banging the hydrospanner around in the shuttle's innocent entrails. "They have been severely lax in the upkeep of this vessel."

Piett glowered at the pile of inorganic offal nearby. "Well, I imagine they shan't have much trouble accessing all the components now, sir."

"You have no cause for complaint." Something inside the exhaust valve went *spang*. "I have installed new sublight fuel cells, optimized engine performance, and recalibrated control sensitivity to combat-grade standards, as well as completing numerous interior upgrades. Provided your flight crew does not rival your service crew for ineptitude, you will find it a vastly superior transport than before."

"No," said Piett mutinously, "I'll find it vastly *faster* than before, sir."

"That is what I said."

There was a sort of strange sucking noise from somewhere in the ship's bowels. Vader's arm shot backwards out of the valve an instant before both sublight engines suddenly shrieked to life and the exhaust fan whipped into motion. Piett jumped like a stung Ewok and fought the urge to jam his fingers in his ears. No proper lambda shuttle was supposed to scream like a TIE Interceptor.

"Finally." Vader glanced up at the huge chrono embedded in the hangar wall over the control office's bay viewport, eyed the empty pad assigned to his son's ship, and made a disgusted noise. "When, or if, my son returns, you will relay to him this message: size may matter not, but *time does*."

He started sharply round the shuttle, making for the ramp, and Piett had to scamper after him.

"Er—where *is* Master Skywalker, sir?"

"Planetside," Vader said. "Attending to *Jedi* business."

Well, that certainly explained a lot.

"I—I'm sure he'll be back shortly, sir—and as a matter of fact, while you have a few moments—"

"I do not," said Vader, already tapping in the access code. "The scheduled launch is in five minutes

and I have no wish to renegotiate it with the New Republic Navy and the system defense force."

Piett scowled at his back, not about to be ranked second behind his own eviscerated shuttle. "I shall be happy to take that responsibility myself, sir"—as if it would take more than five minutes to reschedule a simple shuttle flight—"but I have important information to relay to you, and as Master Skywalker is not yet here to act as copilot—"

Vader wheeled on him. "Since you are so desirous of my attention, perhapsI should have *you* fulfill that role in his place."

Piett practically felt his hackles rising. Like *hells* was he going to be threatened out of the way that easily.

"It'd be my pleasure, sir," he retorted.

"Indeed it will," Vader purred.

Damn the big smug bastard! He hadn't been threatening Piett out of the way, he'd been baiting him *into* it. You'd think he'd know, after all this time, that Darth Kriffing Vader didn't bluff. Kriffing Sith Lords and their psychotic manipulative games. Kriffing Skywalkers, never around when you needed them.

"I presume you have not forgotten how to transmit a flight packet," Vader boomed, leading the way up the ramp.

Piett jammed his cap on furiously, storming after him. "No, *sir.* Once a coms man *always* a coms man, *sir."*

Nevertheless, seeing as the last time he'd acted as a shuttle coms officer he'd been a wet-behind-the-ears petty officer on his first tour of duty in the Imperial Navy and the shuttle in question had been a stodgy old theta-class, he took a surreptitious moment to reorient himself to the station layout while booting up the console. Fortunately Sienar's operating interfaces hadn't really changed much since the start of the Empire. "Course data entered?"

Vader, occupying the pilot's station like a god enthroned, was of course lightyears ahead of him. "Entered and confirmed." A switch on the nav station threw itself at the flick of his finger, streaming the course coordinates and formulas to Piett's console. Renewed irritation powered Piett into overdrive: slot course data into packet, pull manifest, revise—add him, drop Skywalker —overwrite log, copy to packet, pull system status report from Flight Engineering—

"System status reports check, sir. Packet ready for—"

"Sealed," said Vader, thumb already leaving the scanner. "Initiating sublight warmup cycle."

"Acknowledge." Piett selected the appropriate recipients—Eriadu System Defense, the NRN's flagship *Guardian*, and the Lady's bridge—and queued the packet for transmission. "Shuttle *Incomium* to *Executor*. Stand by for flight packet."

There was a rather surprised silence from the bridge as ComScan tried to work out why its admiral was, as Ben Skywalker would certainly have put it, "paying fy."

"Acknowledge, sir—er, *Incomium*," came the answer finally. "Packet received and logged, *Incomium*. Stand by for launch authorization."

"Acknowledge, *Executor*."

He thumped back in his seat and shot a pointed look sideways at Vader.

“I see you have retained your lessons in small craft operation.”

Ha! A concession! Piett allowed himself a slight smile and relaxed his posture a little.

“Those to do with coms duties, at least.” Vader’s mask regarded him balefully. “Perhaps we shall also test those pertaining to piloting, since you are certified on small craft up to 500 k-tons.”

It was alarming how much the man remembered, sometimes. But Vader would sooner drop dead than stoop to playing passenger while an inferior pilot embarrassed himself at the controls—inferior being defined by him as *anyone in the known universe with the possible exception of Luke Skywalker*—so Piett put on a cool, bold face. “If you like, sir.”

Conversation fell back to the bare operational minimum for a few minutes—the ESD called in clearance, *Fidelity* pinged acknowledgement of flight packet receipt, and ComScan overcame its befuddlement long enough to send them the launch authorization. Piett logged everything as fast as he could, but was still making entries when Vader sent the thing roaring out of the hangar and rammed him back into his seat with a stifled curse. Payback for not being sufficiently intimidated, probably; black amusement seemed to be emanating from Vader’s side of the cockpit.

He peeled his lips open with some difficulty. “Quite the turn of foot you’ve given her, sir.”

“It is acceptable.”

Translation: it was fast enough not to bore him to tears, which meant its innards no longer bore the slightest resemblance to a standard lambda shuttle, which meant Piett’s desk was probably already inundated with excruciatingly detailed reports from irate techs who couldn’t make heads or tails of what Lord Vader had done to their vessel. The Lady’s ventral beam blazed by overhead, dead center of the viewport, her port and starboard sidewalls narrowing—then nothing ahead but open space, alive with stars. Piett clutched his arm rest with another strangled obscenity as Vader gunned the sublight engine clear into the red zone.

“More than acceptable, I’d say, sir,” he grunted. “I suppose it’d be asking too much to keep our speed withinthe standard operating parameters?”

“This is a test flight. Assessing the limits of the shuttle’s sublight performance is the primary objective.”

“You might have mentioned that before we left, sir.”

“You were under no compulsion to accompany me. I am well aware of your distaste for such activities.”

“I don’t mind *flying*,” Piett said stubbornly. “Just suicide.”

Vader shot him a sharp look, as though Piett had said something he shouldn’t. Just as abruptly he turned back to the console. “If you lack faith in my ability to control this ship—”

“Not lack of faith so much as—survival reflex—” The ship plunged into a combat-speed eight-G arc around one of Eriadu’s orbital factories, constricting his chest. “I haven’t your tolerance for this—sort of—thing—”

Was that *a hundred thousand klicks per second* they were moving at now? His vision was going dark and fuzzy at the edges; maybe he’d seen an extra zero or two. What g-force were they up to?

Perhaps Vader realized that he was going to knock his admiral out in another few seconds if he didn't make some modifications to his lead foot. Perhaps he just felt he'd gotten his point across. At any rate, Piett felt the acceleration slow, and the pressure pinning him to his seat back lessened considerably as the centripetal force abated. His vision brightened again; now he could make out dingy lights gridded over the nightside surface of the factory satellite as they completed their flyby and hurtled onward toward the outer system. Reflexively he checked the readouts against the flight plan coordinates, but they were of course dead on the money, probably less than three meters of variation. Vader was a legend for his accuracy and precision. And, it went without saying, for his speed; it was supposed to be a four hour flight according to the manifest he'd revised moments ago, but they were already two minutes ahead of their scheduled ETA, and they'd only been under way for ten.

"What is our time to the inner belt?" Vader asked the universe.

Piett wiped a hand over his eyes to clear the last fog out of his head, and squinted at the navicomp. "About forty-five minutes at our present velocity, my lord." The Eriadu system featured three quite large asteroid belts, all heavily mined to feed the planet's insatiable factories. As flying through asteroid fields was the sort of thing only complete imbeciles like Han Solo did, the local authorities maintained safe-passage channels at strategic points through each belt. He'd better establish contact with the nearest channel station to schedule their transit—

"Belay that," Vader ordered, as his hand moved toward the com stud. "You had a matter of urgency to discuss, as I understand."

"Important, sir," Piett corrected mildly. "Not urgent, per se."

"Very well," Vader said, with scathing condescension. "What was so *important* that you could not wait a mere four hours to address it?"

"Not me, sir," Piett said obstinately. "It's a message from your…from the Princess."

Vader turned wholly away from the viewport and stared at him, though their course held perfectly true. "From the Princess."

He sounded as bewildered as Piett confronted with a flight panel.

"Yes, my lord. She entrusted it to me to deliver to you, just before I left Coruscant." He unbuckled his crash webbing and extracted the little security case from his jacket pocket, holding it toward Vader so that the biometric lock was convenient to access. "She said that it was a personal message for you."

Vader did not take it. He stared at the case for several seconds, then again at Piett. "The Princess sent a personal message to *me*."

"Forwarded it, I believe." The tension in Vader's posture unwound a notch or two. He held out an open hand for the case and sat back in the seat, flying casually with one hand while examining the case in his usual terse manner, turning it this way and that, noting its complete lack of distinguishing traits.

"Forwarded from whom?"

"She gave me to understand it was from somebody called Mos Espa, my lord—is everything all right?"

Vader's hand lapsed from the controls; the shuttle had already drifted four klicks off course,

unheard-of sloppiness by his standards. His gaze did not budge from the case, now trembling slightly atop his palm—or was that Piett's imagination?

"My lord? Is something—"

"Somewhere."

"Sir?"

"Mos Espa is a town." Vader's hand closed slowly over the case—no, Piett was not imagining the tremble—and his thumb pressed the biometric lock. "Somewhere, not someone."

The end of the case sliced open on its swivel hinge, and Vader drew out an ancient, battered recorder. The thing had to be a century out of date; bulky, cracked at one end, paint sandblasted away. It did not have a voice interface, just old-fashioned buttons marked with exotic graphemes—they could be letters of an Outer Rim alphabet, or stylized icons from an obscure culture, or something else entirely for all Piett could read them. Vader sat running his fingertips over its humble contours as if over the face of a lover, controls forgotten. Universe forgotten.

"I…see, sir." Piett swallowed, eyeing the flight path as it continued to skew. *Thirty* klicks off course now. "Er…I beg your pardon, my lord, but our heading seems to be—"

Vader threw a switch on the console, and Piett gave a startled yelp as his side of the board sprouted a host of new indicator lights. "Fly," he ordered.

The next instant he had vanished into the crew cabin, and Piett was left staring at the controls trying to remember how you told a throttle apart from an accelerator.

"Well," he muttered to himself under his breath. "*That* went well." Alright, alright—it was a Sienar, just another Sienar, one cockpit array was never that much different from another. Even the Lady relied on the same general pattern, which embarrassingly was more helpful to him than attempting to recollect his long-ago training on *actual* small craft like this one. Thrusters—reverse thrusters—foils—pitch—directional thrusters—alright. Alright. It wasn't going to be that bad. Once he blew the rust off he'd be fine. It wasn't like there was anything to run into, and surely, *surely* Lord Vader would be back before they hit that asteroid belt in thirty minutes or so…

Right. Right. First things first—get her back on the right heading. Piett gripped his port directional thrusts and waggled his pitch controls to get a feel for—damn, she was touchy! He'd thought it was a smallish nudge, but the shuttle nipped sideways like the spring-jumping cricket-fish of Symoona and promptly overshot her course in the opposite direction. Swearing under his breath, Piett corrected her the other way. It took a dozen tries to calibrate his feel for those damned sensitive directionals and get the shuttle back on a level plane within the standard five-klick variation of the flight path. Anybody watching on their scanners had to be laughing their fool heads off at his clumsy antics. Well, kriff them. This hair-trigger level of responsiveness in the controls could only be another of Vader's outrageous moon-jockey modifications—

The deck reverberated under his feet as something slammed into it at speed. Something *inside.*

His hands sprang forward without waiting for his brain, releasing his crash webbing—his feet threw him out of the seat, around the stations, through the gangway, into crew cabin, where Vader —

—where Vader sprawled on the deck on his side, lights spasming on his chest control panel, one hand opening and closing like the gills of a beached fish, the other clinging to the recorder as it

played its message, his eyes rolled back into his head, unfocused and dilated—*where the hell was his mask?*

Piett cast frantically about the cabin, but neither helmet nor mask was anywhere to be seen. All he heard in the silence was a faint, organic rasping—what was he going to do—what the *hell*—

—*do we do if something happens to him?* Seventeen years ago, the midnight medbay meeting, him and Venka and the assistant surgeon, after that hull breach killed Dr. Siler, the only one who'd been allowed to treat Vader, who'd known how to maintain his complicated life support systems —*what do we do if something happens to the suit—what is our contingency plan—*

He darted forward, through the blue haze of the hologram playing from the recorder, over Vader's legs, wrenched an emergency mask from the life support rack and connected it to the emergency oxygen tube at the medical bunk set in the forward bulkhead. Back to Vader—he seized the man by the wrists, hauled him over the deck within reach of the short tube. Shoving him upright against the bulkhead, he fumbled for the breath mask on the bunk, wedged it under the interior mouthpiece of the suit over his mouth and nose, adjusted the strap carefully around the ragged gashed scars at the back of his head. He leapt back to his feet, eyes racing over the control panel beside the bunk —*there*, oxygen flow—atmospheric mix—standard or enriched? Enriched, he'd been without airflow for at least two or three minutes now, maybe longer—it stuttered—he slammed the bulkhead—

A swift inrush of breath—then out. In—out. In…out…in…

Piett closed his eyes and sagged against the bulkhead, feeling a sudden burning in his upper body muscles. Whatever Vader weighed, it was much more than Firmus W. Piett was used to lifting. More than he'd thought he *could* lift.

Did I just interrupt a suicide attempt?

It was the only logical conclusion—except it made no sense, because Vader wouldn't just *quit* like that…would he? He certainly hadn't come aboard with that intention. What in hells could have been in that message to cause such a sudden—such an extreme reaction?

"… do believe there are times when he truly misses your mischief."

Piett turned around and saw the hologram, still playing determinedly from the battered recorder clenched in Vader's unconscious hand.

The speaker was a woman, dark-haired, dark-eyed—very like the Princess indeed, except there was nothing of the Princess' regal air about her. Her ragged, coarse homespun and bent posture suggested a life of long, hard days, sharp words, blisters, sweat. But behind her hung the stars in their glorious, endless array, as they could only be seen from space…or from a desert.

"Ani, this diary is for you. I know you'll be gone a long time, and that you'll be very lonely at times. So will I. This diary is so that when you come home someday, you'll know you were always in my heart. But your destiny lies in the stars. You will achieve great things in the galaxy, Anakin. I have known that from the moment you were born."

His mother. Dear gods, the Princess had sent Vader a hololetter from his dead mother. He didn't know what part of that sentence struck him as the most improbable—that Vader'd had a mother, or that the Princess had had a letter of hers, or that she had somehow brought herself to give it to the father she so resented.

“You must never believe you were mistaken to leave Tatooine. Wherever you go, you carry my love with—”

A faint groan snapped his attention away from the hologram. Vader was planting a shaky hand, pushing himself a little further up.

“My lord? Are you alright?”

He dropped to one achy old knee next to his commander so as to get a better look at his—

His face. White, mostly, the skin pale and flaky as crumbling mortar holding together his bald scalp, mangled cheek, and scar-bound lips. Startling red jumped out here and there—at the corners of the mouth just visible through the clear plastic of the breath mask, the corneas of the eyes, the deep furrows of the worst scars, making them look like still-raw wounds—blue too, the eyes he’d given his son and grandson, only milkier, unfocused from retinal damage.

And a still-dashing scar over the right eyebrow.

Piett wetted his lips, nervous and still. The blue eyes tracked him as best they could, looking almost hunted, like a wild thing cornered by the kath hounds. Between them, the recorder continued looping through the message. Piett reached out and turned it off.

“I—can you hear me, sir?”

Breath in. Breath out. Then a laborious nod.

“Are you alright? Should I adjust the oxygen flow settings? I’m not sure what you—”

“It is—adequate.”

He felt his heart stutter. If it weren’t for the rest of the armor he would have thought a magician had spirited another man into the ship while his back was turned. The voice—a frail rasp, the ruin of the pleasant tenor in the recording the Solo twins had shown him—labored to be heard at all. Tenor. That just wasn’t *right*. His hand dropped away from Vader’s shoulder, as if he had been touching a corpse at a wake.

“Impressed?” Vader wheezed. It was strange, being able to read his meaning so clearly. The damaged face was as freely expressive as the mask was impassive, everything set out plainly: bitterness, self-contempt, acidic humor…shame.

“Yes, sir,” he said quietly. “I doubt anyone else could have done it.”

“Done—what?”

“Lived, sir.” He sat back on his heel. Gods. What must it have taken—to keep going, after such unspeakable injury? He wanted to say more—*you’re amazing, you’re a miracle, you’re twice as strong as I ever thought, how did you carry that and all of us at the same time*—but he knew, looking at those eyes, that the one thing Lord Vader couldn’t bear was sincere praise. Even the little he’d already said had put a haunted look on his face. Piett cleared his throat. “What happened?”

The question startled him; perhaps it even frightened him. “It is of no consequence. It was long ago.”

Oh gods, he thought I was asking about—“I meant, what happened just now, sir?”

Vader's fogged eyes drifted down towards the recorder, sitting innocently in his hand as if it hadn't nearly been the death of a man whom entire armies and the very forces of nature had failed to kill. He stared at it in dead silence. He was not going to answer, of course.

Piett swallowed and scanned the cabin again, ostensibly looking for the missing helmet and mask; in fact he was just glad for something else to think about. He finally spotted the mask, wedged in the shadows under a seat on the opposite side, and the helmet rolled into a corner under a conduit. He wondered whether they still worked.

"I couldn't…hear her…"

It was barely a whisper. "Sir?"

He gestured at his head vaguely. "The helmet…distorts sound. I had to…hear her…myself."

"*The helmet distorts sound?* You nearly *died,* sir!" In a flash fire of rage, Piett didn't even notice he'd started using his damn-fool-ensigns voice. "You couldn't have waited until we got back to the Lady? In your chamber, surely—"

"*No*." Vader would not look him in the eye, but his vehemence startled Piett's anger into hiding even so. "I was nine years old…when I left her. I only saw her…once again…a few minutes before…"

Piett fell silent. He knew that look—that dead, ground-in weight that meant too much grief, carried too long—gods knew, he'd seen it often enough, sometimes in his own mirror. You didn't apologize to a look like that.

"I had no image…of her. No…token. Nothing…nothing…"

His voice evaporated to nothing.

It was a fool thing to do, the kind of thing that under normal circumstances would have been noted on the post-mortem as suicide by proxy; but Piett reached instinctively to grip the hand that still lay limp on the deck. Vader didn't seem to notice one way or the other. More machine than man—what an imbecile he'd been to think so. Machines didn't accidentally kill themselves out of sheer desperation to hear the voice of a loved one long gone.

"How did she come by this? The Princess, how?"

"She didn't tell me." He wished he'd thought to ask.

"Why? What reason did she give for sending it?"

He shook his head slowly. "None. At least…not that she said aloud."

Vader hefted himself up a little more. "And what did she say by other means?"

"Well, I'm no mind reader"—Piett applauded himself for the tiny huff of disgust this elicited —"but I'm confident she didn't mean it as any sort of—accusation." He offered a wry smile. "She, ah, didn't seem to be looking forward to it enough for that."

Vader inhaled laboriously; the emergency mask clearly wasn't as robust as his own respirator. He made no answer. Surely there was something more Piett could say, some sliver of hope to offer, however faint…

“Perhaps…perhaps she merely wanted to honor her grandmother’s wishes.”

Vader’s dim eyes wandered past Piett and found the mask, lying on the desk across the cabin. It stared back at him, one dead man to another. He licked his lips, moistening them enough to speak again. “Then she has done far more than I.”

What to say to that? Anakin Skywalker had indeed achieved great things in the galaxy—but not the way that that gentle, devoted woman had dreamt he would, as even Piett could tell on his mere seconds of acquaintance with her. Ozzel, Needa, the Jedi younglings—such stories would have broken that woman’s heart. Worse than foolish to suggest otherwise, or try to gloss it over, or argue in his defense.

Well, that left only the truth to work with. He didn’t know what good it would do, but on the other hand, what could it possibly hurt?

“Same here, sir. My mother was beside herself when I joined the Axxilan anti-pirate force.” He eased down properly on the deck so as to take the weight off his increasingly irritated knee. “They don’t think much of the military life back home, you see. If I had a decicred for every time she told me I was throwing my life away for no good reason, didn’t I want to get married, what about children—hells, I could have retired a year after I started.” He smiled wistfully. “Then I signed on with the Imperial Navy proper, and she cried for a month straight, I believe.”

Vader remained so silent that if it’d been anyone else, Piett would have assumed him so lost in thought he hadn’t heard a word. Impossible, of course. Vader never missed anything, though he noticed much that he did not consider worthy of acknowledgment. Well, so be it. He’d never claimed to be a Luke Skywalker, and at least he’d tried—

“What…would she have preferred?”

Piett’s eyes snapped up in complete surprise. Vader was still staring at his own mask.

“She, ah…she rather had her heart set on me taking over my great-uncle’s business.”

“Your great-uncle’s business.”

“He, er, ran a greenhouse.” He really should have stopped there—but what the hell. “Exotic flowers, mostly.”

There was a dead silence for five solid seconds…then a weak, coughing laugh burst onto the stage. “Exotic—flowers?” Vader wheezed.

Piett tried to keep a straight face. “I don’t see what’s so funny. Perfectly respectable line of work, horticulture—”

Another laugh got free of Vader, and then Piett was chuckling himself. The idea of him back on Axxila, arranging bouquets of Chandrilan orchids for a living, after all they’d been through…

“No doubt,” Vader managed. “Nevertheless—I am glad you avoided it.”

“A thought which has given me valuable motivation for the last twenty-five years,” Piett agreed, and wonder of wonders, Vader laughed *again.* “She came round a bit more when my sister had children. Amazing the effect grandchildren can have.” He ventured a casual wink. “But I daresay you’ll find that out yourself soon enough.”

Vader’s amusement wilted. “They would do better never to meet me.”

“Fat chance of that. I imagine they’d have to be put in shackles somewhere in the Deep Core to stop them mobbing you. Even then it’d probably only buy you a month or two.” He got to his feet and headed off to retrieve the mask from under the bench. “Can’t imagine where they get it from, sir.”

“That is no mystery,” said Vader. “It is clearly Solo’s influence.”

“Ah, yes.” Piett collected the helmet and carried them back. “Those obstinate, bantha-headed Corellians. What else could it be?”

Vader pointed at him. “You are taking liberties.”

“Just trying to prepare you for the future, sir—*shavit!”*

A tremendous thump struck the hull. Piett shoved mask and helmet at Vader and sprinted for the cockpit, thudding into his seat as another micro-meteor thunked off the deflector shields he’d fortunately left running. They had drifted into the outer arm of the asteroid belt, and the coms station was flashing furiously with a backlog of messages, probably warnings from the system patrol, the Lady, the EDF, the New Republic…what a right pair of fools they’d look.

If they didn’t *die,* that was.

Piett seized the controls, but his intended hard a-port out of the asteroid belt became a hard-a-starboard *into* it as he was forced to evade a hurtling train of meteors walling them in, and then a planetoid-sized one skewing down from above, and then a vaporous blast of gravelly haze—

“Why did you not switch it to autopilot before abandoning the controls?” Vader trucked into view, mask and helmet and spine-chilling bass all back in order, a going concern once more.

“I was a bit preoccupied”—a stellar gust rattled them sideways, Piett wrestling the controls for dear life to stop them smashing into solid ore—“by the fact that you were *dying*, sir!”

“That is no excuse for handling a ship irresponsibly, *dive*—"

Piett jammed the pitch control forward, plunging them below an incoming asteroid just careening out of his blind spot.

“—and I would have been no less dead had a large asteroid impacted us.”

“I stand corrected.” Piett strained at the forward thrusters as the ship shaved past a city-sized obstruction. “Now perhaps, sir, if you’re ready to resume control of—”

“I think not.” Vader actually honest-to-gods crossed his arms and leaned back in his seat. “It is obvious that you are in need of the practice.”

Piett gaped at him for the quarter-second he felt he could spare his attention from the gauges. “Last I checked, small craft piloting wasn’t on the skill set requirements for admirals!”

“There is no reason for allowing any of your training to lapse. Pick up your speed. This is a Navy shuttle, not a nursing home airbus. Why have you not logged any flight time in recent years?”

“Because I was trying to stitch a Super Star Destroyer together with spit and space tape, sir!”

“That is not an acceptable excuse. When you return—veer port—you may expect to attend weekly retraining sessions with the shuttle flight crew.”

“Just so long as it isn’t with you,” Piett snapped.

“Do not think that what has transpired between us entitles you to address me with disrespect, Admiral.”

“Just so long as it isn’t with you, *sir!”*

“Better.”

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tbc

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

> Oh man guys, that was bad even by my standards :| Part of the problem was a prolonged computer disaster. My hard drive crashed earlier this year. I was able to recover the files, but the computer was pretty much unusable until I got the drive replaced, which took a few months. Anyway, we are running again, and I will make a strong effort to complete this before the end of the year, life permitting!

"I have to admit it's a hell of a view."

The *Executor*'s self-appointed shielding system and his father were lined up in front of the bridge viewport, observing the final minutes of the jump to Coruscant. The sight was uncommonly worth seeing. Against the ordinary splendor of hyperspace, twenty-five spiraling contrails of sheer white energy streamed like parade banners around the poor old Lady, trailing from the twenty-five hyper-tug ships of the Five-Fifty-Second Hyperspace Towing Squadron (Augmented), New Republic Navy, Captain Solchis commanding, which had boosted her into lightspeed for one last voyage.

Not that Piett had had much opportunity of appreciating the spectacle. No one had ever tried to hyper-tow a vessel even a quarter of the Lady's size before. The number of things that could go wrong did not bear thinking on—so, inevitably, when not debriefing with Captain Solchis or supervising engineers or trying to stop Lord Vader from unilaterally revising the schematics for the towing anchors, Piett had been preoccupied thinking about every single one of them. The jump out of Eriadu had been, to put it mildly, nerve-wracking; a power flutter from Fusion Four had come within a few amperes of blowing out the hyper-tug *Veracity*'s tow beams mid-transition, which happy eventuality would have torn away their aft starboard quarter and killed everybody aboard both ships in the process. He was not at all sure that they didn't have Vader and/or Skywalker to thank for the fact that it *hadn't* shorted out.

Not exactly the kind of failsafe system designed to make him sleep soundly at night.

But they'd had plenty of time in hyperspace to make repairs to Fusion Four; she was running smoothly now, according to everybody from the power plant tech droids all the way up to Lord Vader. *Veracity* reported minimal damage from the flutter and had recalibrated her surge resistors, and Captain Solchis's entire squadron had performed detailed assessments on their own systems too. There shouldn't be any issues.

Shouldn't be.

He glanced up from his datapad, on which he was obsessively reviewing the hyperspace reversion protocols for the umpteenth time lest some button pressed out of sequence obliterate his entire ship, and spared Skywalker a brief smile. It wasn't every day an ex-Rebel moon jockey gave the

Lady the appreciation she—

“I mean,” Skywalker went on, “she’s no T-65, but—”

“Ungainly Rebel trash.” Vader adjusted his belt, splendidly contemptuous. “When you have piloted an x1 Interceptor, you will understand what a starfighteris.”

“Oh *please*, ten kilos per square meter of atmospheric pressure and you might as well be flying a brick as anything that’s got Sienar written on it.”

A Sith Lord and former second-in-command of the Galactic Empire on one hand, a Jedi Master who commanded the respect of trillions on the other, but one mention of starfighters and you couldn’t have told them apart from a couple of younglings on speeder bikes. Piett readdressed himself disgustedly to his datapad, pausing only to fire a glare of reprimand into the ComScan pit, which was within earshot of the viewport and which was not in his opinion making enough of an effort to wipe the smirk off its collective face.

“That is because Sienar builds *starfighters*, not glorified atmospheric patrol speeders. Perhaps if Incom had been able to decide which type of vehicle they were designing it would not be so encumbered with unnecessary features.”

Skywalker snorted. “Like what, shields and a hyperdrive?”

“Like that astromech droid, which no pilot worth the fumes in his thrusters should require in a dogfight.”

“Well, I hear it’s easy to look good when you never engage at odds worse than two to one in your favor. Not that I’d know”—he kicked back against the viewport frame, feet and arms crossed in a decidedly Corellian attitude—“we Rebel scum prefer an actual challenge.”

“I have won plenty of engagements against superior numbers, young one. I assure you that—what do you mean by that smirk, Admiral?”

Piett hastily rearranged his face. “Nothing, my lord. Merely, ah, enjoying the moment.”

He certainly wasn’t about to mention the holo clip the Solo twins had shown him.

“You assure me that *what*, exactly?” Skywalker demanded, as ever the perfect Vader-distracting device.

“That the superior maneuverability of the x1 renders the T-65 sluggish by comparison. Its gyrational operating parameters exceed seven hundred meters per second on all axes.”

Skywalker raised an eyebrow. “So that’s what, niner-five rotations per second?”

“Mechanically that is possible,” Vader said, “but—”

Skywalker was already nodding. “Not combat-sustainable.” He smirked. “You blacked out trying, though, didn’t you?”

Vader began prowling the length of the viewport, irritated once more by his offspring’s imperishable impudence. He had to be irritated by it, Piett suspected, because the alternative would be to admit it entertained him, and that would be letting the Rebels win. “No. Unlike you, I possess a modicum of self-preservation.”

“You’re standing there in a full-body life support suit with four prosthetic limbs and lecturing *me* about self-preservation?”

In the bowels of ComScan, Lieutenant Yara made a noise suggesting one of his lungs had turned inside out, and Ensign Chimmel, like a complete Ozzel, snickered *out loud.* Luckily for them Vader had bigger gooberfish to fry.

“As a frequent and willing passenger aboard that ongoing catastrophe Solo persists in calling a ship, yes, I consider your judgment lacking.”

“You’re not fooling anybody,” Skywalker informed him. “She’s your kind of ship and we all know it.”

Vader twisted, a cybernetic tornado of indignation. “She is most certainly not *my* kind of—”

“Of course she is, she’s got big guns and she’s *fast*. And while we’re on the subject she can pull three-point-six rotations per second on her forward x-axis. Pretty impressive for something that size.”

Vader eyed Skywalker with grudging admiration. “Three-point-six? You have executed rolls at that speed?”

Skywalker grinned. “Actually I got her up to three-point-seven for a few seconds one time over Selonia…Leia about blew a circuit though.”

“Why was that?”

“The kids were riding along.” He coughed. “Might’ve knocked out one or two of them by accident.”

An odd wheeze came from Vader’s vocabulator, as if he had started to laugh and caught himself the barest instant too late. ComScan sniggered. Piett fixated on his datapad, wondering if it was possible to sprain his lips. With his luck, probably.

“Then again,” Skywalker said, elaborately thoughtful, “she also flipped out when I rolled that trash hauler we hijacked on Toruun a year or two after Yavin, so maybe she’s just not into spins.”

Sheer dismay put all thought of circumspection out of Piett’s mind. “Why in all nine hells were you doing barrel rolls in a *trash hauler*?”

He immediately found himself on the business end of two enormously offended looks. In identical tones of *what could be more obvious,* they answered: “To see if it *could.*”

“A pilot,” Vader added stentoriously, “should always be familiarized with the full capabilities of whatever vehicle he is helming.”

“Well, yes,” said Skywalker, “but the *real* reason is, it’s fun.”

Piett hastily cleared his throat and nodded to placate the mad moon jockeys. Fortunately the only thing mad moon jockeys liked as much as flying was arguing with other mad moon jockeys.

“It is not ‘fun’,” Vader boomed, pronouncing the contemptuous quotation marks with ease. “It is the hallmark of a professional.”

“You still aren’t fooling anybody, Father. Come on, Admiral, you’ve never tried to pull a barrel roll

with the Lady?"

"Certainly not!" Piett recoiled. "This is a *dreadnaught*."

"So?" Skywalker shot a considering glance down the Lady's battered prow. "I bet she could swing point-two if you got the sublights good and hot."

Piett paled. "I hardly think Lord Vader would—"

"The sublight drive could reasonably sustain a twenty-two percent power overage for a period of thirty seconds without serious risk of burnout," mused Vader. "If we also overrode the safety margins on the starboard gyrothrusters I would not be surprised to see her make point-three."

He wouldn't.

"Huh," said Skywalker. Almost in unison, they craned their heads toward the chrono on the bulkhead counting down their ETA to Coruscant.

Sweet angels of Iego, he would. *Modicum of self-preservation, my afterburners.*

"Sir," Piett tried, feeling faint. "The artificial gravity compensators are not designed to accommodate such centripetal forces."

Vader waved a hand in dismissal. "The compensators can be temporarily deactivated for the maneuver."

Can be? CAN be?

"I—y-yes, my lord, I suppose so, but—but—but with our, ah, our hull integrity so—so compromised by patches, I cannot advise that—"

He stopped dead. Skywalker had just reached up to place what looked like a thoughtful hand on his chin. Except that twitch in his shoulder indicated that it was really there to hide a laugh.

Were they—good *gods*, he was being had! Of all the insupportable—twenty-eight *years* he'd put up with Vader's antics and now this—

No doubt sensing his sudden spike of aggravation, Skywalker burst into a fit of silent snickering. Vader hooked his thumbs in his belt with unmistakable satisfaction.

Two and a half months' exposure to his son and the man was pulling *pranks*. Gods, he missed the good old days, when Vader's idea of a practical joke was to temporarily throttle you. And just think, Skywalker was the *mature* member of the family! What the hells could he look forward to once the Solo brats got their wicked little claws into him?

"Very amusing, sir," he seethed.

"I am merely enjoying the moment."

Piett scowled at his datapad and wondered if it was too late to take Airen Cracken up on that job offer.

Well, he could check soon enough, if all went well; they were closing in on the fifteen-minute mark. He put the pad up and proceeded to the helm station, where Venka had been immersed for hours now drilling on the reversion procedure with the senior lieutenants and the helmsman. "Captain, I trust all hands are at readiness?"

“Aye, sir. All hands standing by.” Venka climbed out of the pit and stepped up beside him, not without a glance towards Vader & Son, now staring unnervingly at one another in one of their voiceless conversations. In a low, tight voice, he added, “Moment of truth, sir.”

Piett knotted his fingers behind his back. “I’ve every confidence in you and in our crew, Captain.”

“Thank you, sir.” Venka pursed his lips into a thin, taut line, eyes on the spinning tunnel of hyperspace. Abruptly, he turned to face Piett fully. “Sir—it’s been an honor serving with you these past years. I shall never forget them.”

He stuck his hand out, a little tentatively. Piett felt a sharp prickle in his eyes as he took it. It felt strangely like being back at the commencement ceremonies on Carida, shaking hands with the commandant, stepping off the deck of one life to the boarding ramp of another. “Nor I, Captain.”

He hoped the life they were about to embark on now wasn’t the afterlife.

The shipwide intercom pinged, announcing an all-hands fleet transmission from Captain Solchis. “*Fidelity* to Task Force Aurek. All ships confirm stand by for realspace reversion in fifteen minutes.”

Venka pressed the closest com interface. “*Executor* to *Fidelity*, acknowledge.”

Other voices crackled in from the rest of the hyper-tugs: the near-casualty *Veracity,* the *Fortitude,* the*Endurance,* and all their score of sisters. He could hear the tension twanging from each of them, the tight-wound energy and laser focus of men about to attempt a great and unguaranteed feat. For a curious moment the clock unraveled right back to Axxila, that old tin can of a gunship he’d been first mate on, making a sting jump into the system and trying to look enough like an inbound cargo ship to make the pirates who hid just inside the hyper limit pounce on them—pirates who might turn out to have bigger muscles and sharper teeth than they did…

“Admiral, Captain.” Piett snapped back out of his little reverie; Skywalker had broken away from Vader and was offering his hand to each of them. “I’m off to prep for takeoff.”

Piett frowned. “You’re sure you won’t stay to watch the reversion?”

Skywalker shook his head. “You’ve done enough as it is. Thank you for having me aboard.”

Venka actually mustered something of a grin. “Better late than never, Skywalker.”

He winked, flipped them a cheeky Alliance salute, and looked back over his shoulder. “See you in the bay in forty-five, Father?”

Vader, with nothing but his back, projected comprehensive skepticism. “Presuming your twin fulfills her end of this ill-advised arrangement.”

“She already did.” Skywalker dug a datachip out of his pocket and tossed it, adding, “Try being less cynical once in a blue moon.”

Vader made a slight gesture, turning; the chip landed in his hand and was immediately wagged at the offensive party who’d thrown it. “That the universe habitually gravitates to the least favorable course of events is not *my* doing.”

“Tatooine Corollary,” muttered Piett.

Skywalker laughed. “Exactly.”

Venka's brow wrinkled. Vader's respirator cycled once in fuming silence while he tried to interpret this exchange for himself. "What is the Tatooine Corollary?"

"No time," Skywalker said brightly, "got to go, lots to pack up, see you there."

Piett kneaded the bridge of his nose as Skywalker strolled off the bridge, hands stuck in his pockets and only barely having the grace to not whistle as he went. Venka, whose survival instincts rivaled those of a cockroach on doomsday, seized the opportunity to dive back into the cover of the helm station.

Five, four, three, two, one…

"Explain."

Piett sighed. "A theory propounded by your daughter-in-law, sir, stating that any situation involving a Skywalker shall immediately escalate to the worst possible scenario, which shall then be resolved in the least probable fashion."

Vader gave this a moment's consideration. "An admirably succinct analysis."

"I couldn't see much room for argument myself, sir."

Vader's helmet bent his way a little, the beckoning motion so familiar to him after all these years. Piett left Venka and the crew to their business—it was down to execution now, admirals had no business getting underfoot—and fell in beside Lord Vader at the viewport, feeling suddenly and deeply glad for Skywalker's departure. No impossible sons, no bloody Borsk Fey'lyas, no New Republics; just him, and his commander, and their ship, and the mission. One last time.

The shipwide intercom pinged, announcing an all-hands fleet transmission, and Piett braced himself for the graveled drawl of *Fidelity*'s Captain Solchis, a far cry from the crisp Core accent His Majesty's Navy had insisted on. "*Fidelity* to Task Force Aurek. All ships confirm stand by for realspace reversion in five minutes."

Piett twisted his fingers together. He heard Venka's reply, sharp and tight as if they were about to enter battle. "*Executor* to *Fidelity*, acknowledge."

The acknowledgements cascaded in from the rest of the task force, and then Solchis again: "*Fidelity*to *Executor*, initiate prep sequence. All other ships, bring reversion dampeners to readiness level alpha…"

Venka acknowledged and began barking orders at top volume. "Helm, stand by for heading oh-twelve-two. Engines, stand by for sublight ignition. Power and Life Support, stand by for handoff. Shields, all units prepare for reversion turnover."

"*Fidelity* to *Executor*, power control handoff in ten—nine—"

"Sublight engines on standby, Captain—"

"*Executor* to *Fidelity,* power control handoff complete—"

"Shields are green, Captain—"

The orders and acknowledgements avalanched on, Piett mentally ticking each off against the mental hologram he'd built of the entire procedure, even though at this pace there'd be almost no chance of correcting a mistake in time.

"Fidelity to Task Force Aurek. Realspace reversion in sixty seconds."

Twenty-five years' worth of struggle, of near misses and tight scrapes, disasters avoided by hairs, miracles wrought on pure willpower, seemed all to be boiling in his throat at once. Bringing the Lady home, the thing they'd fought so hard to do for so long, the thing that had seemed so damned impossible…it didn't seem that it could actually happen in just—

"Thirty seconds to realspace reversion."

Something would go wrong. Something *always* went wrong.

"This will be a day long remembered," said Vader.

Piett licked dry lips. "I certainly hope so, sir."

"I know so."

"Fifteen seconds to realspace reversion. Ten. Five … four … three … *Execute!*"

"Execute!" barked Venka.

A strange, disconcerting sensation swelled around him and in him, like the ship and his body had briefly reorganized themselves on a molecular level. The lights blacked out as *Fidelity* and the other twenty-four hyper-tugs routed every spare watt from the Lady's power plants to the hyper tractor anchors and inertial dampeners the engineers had spent that last week in Eriadu preparing. The deck bucked under his feet with the vibration of the strained keel and superstructure, emergency klaxons blared, blue lightning spewed from the shields as light whipped, unraveled, congealed down into points—

—and stilled. Out of the void it blossomed, straight and true ahead, their northern star…Coruscant and her trillion souls.

The com spoke into the dark, unmoving bridge. "*Fidelity* to *Executor.* Welcome home, gentlemen."

There was a momentary silence, a huge breath held—and as the bridge lights flashed back on it released, a hundred men shouting like ten thousand. Hats soared out of the pits, men leaping out and embracing, and Piett found himself dragged into the chaos, his hand being pumped up and down by everybody from Captain Venka to Ensign Chimmel while mouse droids went haring between their ankles and did their damndest to break everybody's necks. Over the intercom echoed the cheers and whoops of the tugboat crews, for all they were a bunch of Rebel scum, and out beyond the viewport he even saw a New Republic warship fire off a triple broadside of torpedo blanks, the same greeting the Imperial Navy would have given a flagship on her return home. At the viewport Vader continued silent and alone.

"Stations," Piett had to repeat about fifty times, even while blinking back a shameful dampness in his eyes, "*stations*, gentlemen! We're not done yet. Captain Venka, I'll thank you to get these miscreants in order!"

Venka tried, but his heart clearly wasn't in it. Nor—though he blustered mightily, as appearances must be kept up—was Piett's. It took fully ten minutes to rein the crew, on the bridge and all over the ship, back into some semblance of order and get the sublights up for the final push. As things settled, Piett drew up once more to the solitary figure at the viewport. "I apologize, sir," he said. "I'm afraid the moment got the better of us."

“There is no need to apologize, Admiral.”

His voice was very distant, and a little uncertain; had the moment had gotten the better of him too? A month or two ago, Piett would never have believed it. Surreptitiously he mopped the corner of the eye opposite Vader, trying to look as though he’d merely gotten a bit of dust in it.

The chatter of voices began rising behind them into a fast, busy pitch—calls incoming, movements being coordinated. Piett shifted and cleared his throat. “Well, I suppose we’re not quite finished yet.”

“Indeed. There is much to be done if we are to be prepared for our guests.”

“Yes, sir, I shall see to—I beg your pardon, what guests?”

“The Chief of State and her entourage.”

Oh no. No, no, no—“They’re—I thought—that is, my, lord, it was my understanding that we were due to meet the New Republic’s delegation in Galactic City—”

“We will. She is making a preliminary visit of a more private nature.”

Piett put one hand on the transparisteel to steady himself while he kneaded his forehead. “By ‘preliminary visit of a private nature’, sir, am I to understand that this ship is about to be infested with juvenile Solos?”

“That is correct, Admiral.” A pause. “Also one juvenile Skywalker.”

“Gods damn it all,” Piett muttered. Vader glared. “I mean, it shall be my greatest pleasure to have them aboard, sir.”

“Indeed it will.” His superior swept off in a swirl of silk-trimmed armorweave, leaving Piett to massage the lingering headache out of his temples. And figure out how to baby-proof nineteen kilometers of warship in half an hour.

Kriffing Skywalkers.

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tbc

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Q: Why has it been so long since this fic was updated?

A: Author was indisposed.

Q: You mean she caught COVID?

A: That would have been a good excuse.

Q: You mean she's an essential worker on the front lines of the pandemic and has no time for writing anymore?

A: That would also have been a good—

Q: She's been at home this whole time, hasn't she?

A: …Maybe.

Q: WTF?

A: Look, she just had a Thing with the ending, okay? It happens.

Q: It happens a lot.

A: Unfortunately we can't argue with that.

Q: You think maybe if she spent more time writing actual story and less time concocting elaborate author notes apologizing for once-a-year posting schedules, she'd conceivably get this finished before the next apocalypse hits?

A: Acktchooally, she has the entire last chapter and epilogue written AS WE SPEAK and is merely in the final stages of proofreading and will have everything posted by Christmas! How do you like THEM apples—

Q: She said she was going to finish this thing last Christmas.

A: Alright, technically you may have a fair point there, but this time—

Q: I can't believe any readers are still putting up with this.

A: Yeah, us either. We don't deserve them.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Read me the list again," Piett barked, turning a circle in the middle of the hangar.

Venka squinted at his datapad. "Fuel feeds shut down—"

"Check."

"Atmospheric failsafes tested—"

"Check."

"Tools and maintenance kits stowed in storage lockers—"

"And moved to Hold 12?"

"Yes, sir. Ventilation shafts sealed—"

"All of them? What about that one?"

He pointed. Venka's gaze climbed up the bulkheads, over the bay control room viewport, between the empty starfighter rails, and past the pilot accessways to a distant tile of grating set into the twenty-meter ceiling. It then carefully abseiled back down and landed with some concern on Piett. "Sir, we're talking about a toddler here."

Piett glared. "Who, I shall reiterate, levitates objects with. His. *Brain.*"

Venka sighed. "Yes, sir." He made a *get-a-move-on* gesture at the deck officer, who dragged himself up from the generator housing (where he'd been trying to catch his breath from the fifty or so orders that had kept him scurrying around like a womp rat on glitterstim for the last half hour) and went at a limping jog to the emergency enviro station on the port bulkhead. Golden alert lights blazed on and a scream of stiff machinery cascaded from the ceiling.

"What else?" Piett half-shouted over the reverberating screech of the vent hatch grinding shut for probably the first time in its operational life.

"Ah…flammables cleared…waste chutes magnetically sealed…triple-strength security patrol stationed at all exits—"

"And on standby to engage blast doors?"

"Yes, sir."

Piett fidgeted. “We’re forgetting something.”

“Sir,” said Venka patiently, “there are three hundred thousand trained military professionals aboard. We can handle a baby and a few teenagers for an hour or two.”

Piett glared again. “If that were true, we would be having this conversation aboard the first bloody Death Star. Or don’t you remember what happened the last time teenagers related to Lord Vader got loose aboard an Imperial naval vessel?”

Venka flipped his datapad back up with a vaguely rebellious air. “I would hardly consider the situations analogous, sir. What do you expect them to do, hijack the ship?”

“Ships!” He snapped his fingers under the nose of the deck officer just as the man came panting back. “I want the power cells pulled from those shuttles over there and the weapons systems unlinked—no, as a matter of fact, move them out of this hangar completely. No sense even presenting the temptation.” There’d still be Skywalker’s yacht to entice the little devils, but that was his lookout.

The deck officer threw a pleading look at Venka, who merely sighed. “Yes, sir. Mordan, you get the prep cycles started, I’ll call in for flight crews.” Venka touched his earpiece. “Coms, this is the captain speaking, get me Flight Commander Brandei.” Pause. “Yes, it’s about Hangar Bravo Five again…”

No doubt cursing the day he’d been born—or if he was smart, the day a certain paranoid admiral had been born—the deck officer wheezed off again. Piett turned another circle, doing his damnedest to think like a Skywalker. Except Skywalkers *didn’t* think, did they? They just kriffing *knew* things. He blew out an exasperated breath. What he wouldn’t give to have a spot of that Force wizardry of theirs himself, if only for one blasted minute—at least then he might have *some* idea of how their brains operated on the inside.

Oh, damnation—the cargo lift. They’d already closed it, of course, the great gaping *bottomless chasm* had been Item 1 on the babyproofing list, but he’d meant to check that the repulsors were activated below, in case a Vaderlet got the hatch back open and jumped in. He turned to Venka to ask about it but found him in the depths of what sounded a very complicated conversation with the flight commander over where to move the shuttles. Mordan would probably know—

Mordan had three shuttles to flight prep and could do without the interruption. Piett turned on his heel and headed for the control room lift. He’d feel better if he checked for himself anyway.

In the control room it was dark, except for the hangar lights outside the broad viewport and the indicator lights on the control panels. He deposited himself behind the first workstation, scanning the panel for the cargo lift…cargo lift…controls, no, where were the status readouts—

“Admiral.”

Deeply ingrained survival reflexes prevented him from jumping like an electrocuted nexu, but his eyes darted up to the viewport. Perfectly framed between the gaping bay doors, Coruscant’s night-side hemisphere regarded him, draped in diamond necklaces of lights, beringed with satellites and the glitter of traffic. Superimposed over the spectacle, motionless in the shadows, Vader’s reflection returned the planet’s gaze.

Piett moved to stand to attention, but Vader waved him down. “As you were.”

“Yes, sir. I was just checking something.” He bent quickly over the board again and this time

spotted the readouts for the cargo lift. The repulsors were only on at half-strength. But that was three hundred tons of load lift. Quite sufficient to catch any freefalling adolescents. Overkill, in fact. Ridiculously excessive. He ought to turn it down if anything…

"I trust you have made appropriate and…*thorough* preparations."

Piett swore at himself silently and tweaked the repulsors up another ten percent. *Tatooine Corollary adjustment,* he told himself; that sounded better than *ingrained paranoia*. "Yes, my lord, we're nearly ready. I've given orders for those shuttles down there to be transferred out of the way. I've not checked Her Highness' ETA with ComScan yet but—"

"Fifteen minutes, approximately," Vader said distantly. "There is sufficient time to clear the shuttles, provided the deck officer is expeditious."

Kriffing Skywalkers, *they just* know *things.*

Piett nodded and stood up, forcing himself to assume an at-ease pose. The first shuttle was just lifting off. He watched it proceed out of the bay, followed by its two sisters, and tried to make himself actually relax. Perhaps Venka would turn out to be right. Even if all three junior Solos *were* as badly addicted to adrenaline as he feared, what greater thrill could they ask for than meeting *Darth Vader?* And little Ben, most likely, would have eyes only for his beloved Dada.

Speaking of whom… Piett leaned forward slightly to get a view of the yacht on its pad. The running lights were still dark and the ramp was retracted. Damn him, how could it possibly take this long to pack one duffel bag? He *must* realize what a disaster it would be if this meeting happened without him. The Princess had been testy enough the last time; with her brood on hand, she'd probably be primed to blow the restraining bolt if Vader so much as breathed in the wrong direction. Which was approximately 99.999% of all available directions. If ever a buffer named Luke Skywalker had been needed, it was now.

But he'd be eager to see his wife and child again; he'd surely be here on time.

Please, please be here on time.

He followed Vader's unbudging basilisk stare out the bay to Coruscant, nimbly twirling her place in the universe's endless ballet. "Good to be home, sir?" he ventured.

Vader spared him a skeptical glance. "You consider this system home?"

"Er—I meant for you, sir."

"It is a hive of scum and villainy under this or any other government. I cannot imagine what appeal you think it holds for me."

He then went back to staring ahead at luminous Coruscant, the insectoid eyeplates of the helmet making him look uncommonly like a moth transfixed by a glowpanel.

On closer inspection, though, it couldn't be the *planet* on which Vader was so intent; the occasional slight tip of his helmet and shifting of his weight betrayed an inner activity, a response to something Piett was not equipped to perceive. Or, more likely, to some*one*.

He meshed his fingers behind his back. "Perhaps young Miss Solo, sir?"

For exactly the second time in their working relationship, he had caught Vader totally flat-footed. The helmet snapped towards him for several breath cycles. Finally a low growl emerged. "How did

you know that?"

Piett tried not to look *too* insufferably pleased with himself. "Oh, I know lots of things, sir."

"You do not know the first thing about the Force," Vader snapped.

"Perhaps not, my lord, but I do know you." And by extension Jaina Solo, the clear heir apparent where Vader's signature brand of aggressive and impetuous boldness was concerned.

Vader stared at him a second or two longer before turning (flouncing, a more suicidal observer might have said) back to the viewport. Sulky, no doubt, over the unlooked-for dent in his reputation as an inscrutable living legend. But he must have been impressed in spite of himself, for the next moment: "Your intuition serves you well. If the Force *were* with you…"

The unfinished thought left a sort of melancholy echo in the air. A shade of wistfulness, it might be…or was it loneliness? It *must* have been lonely, all these years, to be the only person on the ship who could perceive this mysterious Force of his. *If I could only have it for a minute*—a ridiculous fantasy, but how else could he understand?

You could always ask.

His tongue ran with the thought before his brain could think better of it. "What's it like, my lord? The Force, I mean?"

Make that three times. Vader actually skipped an entire breathing cycle this time, staring at him like he'd sprouted wings and a proboscis.

"Never mind, sir," Piett said hastily, "just an idle thought."

"You are only the second person who has ever asked me that question."

"I—I apologize, sir, I meant no intrusion or—"

"Why do you wish to know?"

"Well…" His mouth was sand. This was farther out of his comfort zone than the Unknown Regions had been. "I suppose because…that is, it's clearly an integral part of your life, and—and I've no experience of it myself, so…I should like to understand a bit better."

The basilisk stare pinned him for another several seconds. In the hangar the proximity lights flashed yellow, indicating an inbound ship had crossed the sensor perimeter five thousand klicks out. The Chief of State and her family were about to dock, Skywalker was *still* nowhere to be seen, and here was Firmus W. Piett making belated philosophical enquiries.

"I cannot impart any experience of it to you in words."

Piett nodded, mostly relieved. Though there was a *tiny* pang of—

With thoughts, however, some measure of accuracy is possible.

Piett nearly had a coronary then and there. Another voice—a *strange* voice—inside his mind, where he'd only ever heard *his* voice—was this what going mad felt like?

You are not going mad, replied the voice. A brief pause. *But yes. Even at times to those accustomed to such things.*

Piett swallowed and tried to muster something more intelligent than abstract primal panic. *So… this…the Force?*

No. Your mind lacks the necessary structure to perceive the Force directly. However, I can show you what I perceive…for a short time. Prolonged telepathy would destroy your neural pathways within fifteen minutes.

Ah. That probably explained why he'd always killed prisoners as soon as he'd finished interrog—

Someone flipped the universe's power switch on.

What impressed itself on him was—was something he barely had the vocabulary to cling to. Every insect in an infinite hundred-dimensional jungle had awoken at once, and all their voices were prickles of touchable light tugging at anchors in his own body. Except it wasn't sound or sight or touch as he'd ever known them, it was a whole new plane of existence—a soulish kind of energy that touched and suffused and bound together every man on the bridge, every burst of emotion, every conduit and cable in the bulkheads and decks, the so-called lifeless vacuum outside the transparisteel, even the blasted mouse droids—

The vision switched off. Piett staggered; he felt drunk in his ears, eyes, fingers, nose, tongue, as though his brain couldn't remember how to operate its physical equipment. Eventually, as his neurons started to get their feet back under them, he realized that the only reason he hadn't keeled over was because of the enormous glove locked around his right bicep.

"That," Vader said, "is something like it."

"…my gods," Piett croaked. That—or probably something *more* intense than that, because as far as he could tell they hadn't even looked farther than this ship—was how Vader and Skywalker and the Solo youngsters and little Ben lived *every single moment.*

Of course they were all maniacs.

"As I said, words do not suffice."

"They certainly don't." Piett worked his mouth, trying to get some moisture back into it. "Thank you, sir. For showing me."

Vader absorbed this silently for some time. "And you. For…inquiring." His gaze traveled back to the hangar opening, where a white speck was now visible closing the last few hundred kilometers. "As I said, only one other ever did."

Piett thought he could guess who she had been. But he merely nodded, and immediately regretted even that as a rush of vertigo nearly knocked him over. Vader propelled him to a chair, into which he sank gratefully, hands pressed to his temples while he stared at the deck trying to reorient himself. Silence reclaimed control of the darkened room for several minutes, broken only by the rhythm of the respirator and regular alert tones from the control panel.

"Can you stand?"

"Yes, sir." Piett pushed himself up, surreptitiously bracing his still-shaky knees on the back of the seat. A beam of scarlet light through the viewport drew his eyes up; the proximity lights were flashing crimson, and the *Falcon* was once more riding the invisible rail of the tractor beam through the bay's shimmering airlocks.

And still no sign of Skywalker.

Piett swallowed and finally faced the music. “I trust, sir, that Master Skywalker does intend to join us?”

“I have no doubt he will arrive at the moment of his choosing and not a single instant earlier,” Vader said, in a tone that could have bleached and starched uniforms for a whole detachment.

“Ahem,” said Piett. “Would you like me to dispatch a security team to fetch him, sir?”

Vader cast a withering look down from his superior height. “And wait three years while they attempt to catch him?”

He swept past toward the exit. Piett bristled along behind him into the lift car. “I seem to recall they weren’t the only ones who had difficulty on that score, *sir*.”

Vader twitched a pauldron, his version of a shrug. “He is his mother’s son.” He glared at the lift chrono. “Except that *she* was always prompt.”

When they arrived in the access corridor and came to the deck-level observation windows, the *Falcon* was touching down, her hydraulic exhaust flooding the deck so that she appeared to be surfacing from a cloud. Vader’s step slowed, and finally came to a halt. Following his gaze, Piett could see Solo and his Wookiee companion in the cockpit, and the shadows of other figures moving behind them—then a little shock of red hair peeped over the top the console, and a pair of little hands were shooed away from various controls and levers.

Vader’s inhale sounded much sharper than usual. He took a step back from the window.

All at once something bloomed inside Piett, something that perhaps had spent many years germinating in the silent dark soil, waiting for the end of winter. He didn’t want to call it pity, not least because he knew how offended Vader would be by such a notion. Compassion, then, for a man who’d once had what must have been a tremendous capacity for love, and who’d instead led such a lonely life for so long. Perhaps Vader deserved no such compassion…but then again, it wasn’t a question of deserving, was it? It was a question of giving, and of accepting.

Unafraid, he laid an understanding hand on the massive shoulder. “Shall I go greet them, sir, while you wait for Master Skywalker?”

Vader crossed his arms and gave a short nod, keeping back from the window so as not to be easily seen.

Piett left him in the corridor and stepped into the hangar, where Venka was just making a beeline for the hatch. He stopped and saluted. “Sir, if you won’t be needing me, I’ll return to the bridge.”

Please don’t need me, his face said.

Piett was tempted to need him on purpose, just to give the man a healthy appreciation of what he’d spent the last twenty-eight years dealing with on a daily basis. But that probably fell under the heading of cruel and unusual punishment. More importantly, it was a private affair. “By all means, Captain. I shall be available by com if there are any urgent transmissions. Which”—he pulled a page from Lord Vader’s book and pointed a finger—“shall *not* be construed to include calls from media outlets, reporters, or Senator Borsk Fey’lya’s office, am I understood?”

Venka grinned. “Certainly, sir.”

Piett clapped his shoulder and proceeded alone across the hangar to the arrival zone of the *Falcon’s* pad. The ramp was deploying, albeit with several ominous screeches suggesting it might

be just as likely to simply fall off. It'd be no surprise. He wondered (a bit hopefully) if the Princess planned to make Vader wait again, but the next moment legs strode into view, pausing at the top.

"…said this before, but I'll say it again. If any of you would rather stay on the *Falcon*—"

"Whew. Good. Count me out."

"I was speaking to our children!"

"We aren't scaredy-nerfs, Mom."

"Yeah!"

"Of course not, but you don't have to prove that to anybody. Not to me, not to your father—"

"And least of all Granddad, we *know*."

"We're coming, Mom."

"Alright."

There was a pause—Piett imagined them all taking a deep breath—and then the Princess appeared arm in arm with Solo. By way of diplomatic concessions, she had traded out her usual severe white for soft blue, and he—praise the merciful gods—was *not* wearing his blaster, though he kept frowning and scratching his hip uneasily. Hot on their heels, brandy-brown eyes darting keenly, came Jaina, trailed by her more cautious brothers. Anakin Junior caught Piett's eye and ventured a wave and a smile.

"Your Highness, General Solo, Miss Solo, gentlemen." Piett stepped smartly forward and offered his hand to each in turn. "Welcome aboard the *Executor*."

"Astral," murmured Jaina, the future starfighter pilot. Jacen and Anakin stuck their hands in their jacket pockets, heads craned back looking at—*looking at the damned ceiling vent.* Anakin was pointing at the catwalks enthusiastically, tracing out a way to get to the vent. Ha! He'd enjoy playing the security footage back for Venka's edification.

"Admiral," said the Princess, eyeing the otherwise empty hangar. "At least someone came to meet us."

"Hey," shrugged Solo, "Darth Pops can take his own sweet time as far as I'm concerned."

"Hh-hm," said Piett. "Will we also have the pleasure of Mrs. Skywalker's company?"

"In a minute," said the Princess. "She's…handling a minor crisis."

"I trust nothing too serious?"

"Oh, it's serious alright," muttered Jaina. "Seriously disgusting."

"Detonator diaper," said Anakin. He mimicked an explosion with both hands.

"Ah," said Piett. "Powzered? Or dare I say, dusted?"

"Totally one hundred percent Death Starred." Anakin grinned, though it was a nervous-looking grin.

“And speaking of things that go boom,” Jacen cut in, “you still owe us Point Number Three. Looks like we’ve still got time.”

“Er—I’m not sure, I expect Lord Vader will be along any moment—”

“So make it fast!”

Three insistent faces leaned towards him impatiently. Piett glanced nervously at the Princess, but she merely shared a resigned look with Solo and shrugged. “A deal is a deal, Admiral.”

“Well, I…I would have to say…I would have to say that you ought to take it easy on him.”

“Easy?” Four sets of eyebrows bounced off the ceiling, while a mask every bit as impassive as Vader’s descended on the Princess’ face.

“Easy,” Piett repeated. “It’s…that is, it has been a long time since any of us aboard this vessel has experienced normal family life. For Lord Vader it has been even longer. That is no small adjustment to make at our time of life. So yes, I think you ought to take it easy on him.” He paused. “To begin with.”

Be a damn shame if they took it easy on him *forever.*

As the three junior Solos debated this final pearl of wisdom amongst themselves in furious whispers, Piett caught the Princess’s eye and stepped closer. “I delivered the message you sent, before we left Eriadu,” he murmured. “It…it was greatly appreciated. I thought you ought to know.”

She nodded, smooth-faced as a statue, but he saw her knuckles whiten on Solo’s hand and saw him draw her a little bit closer, like a ship being towed to safe harbor. “Thank you, Admiral.”

An indistinct call crossed the hangar, and they all pivoted to see Skywalker emerge from the portside lift, waving. Thank the Force.

“Uncle Luke!”

“Hi, Uncle Luke!”

“About time, kid.”

“*Dada Dada Dada!”*

Down the *Falcon*’s ramp and across the landing pad shot a small redheaded comet wearing nothing but a diaper and a pair of nonskid spotted socks. Skywalker broke into a run and intercepted the incoming attack halfway across the deck, sweeping Ben off his feet and into the air as he squealed for pure joy. “Dada, Dada, az mist you!”

The Princess’ face shattered into a brilliant smile. Piett, finding rather to his surprise that he had to look away in order to maintain something like decorum, saw Mara come down the ramp and pause on the edge of the pad, hands full of little clothes and eyes full of joy. Rather more sedate than her last arrival; but then she would have been hard-pressed to get into kissing range without one of Ben’s flailing little limbs clocking her in the nose.

“Dada! Az fy ship wis Unca Han! Az come see you! Az see big *big* ship! Az pay fy, Dada? Az pay fy? Az mist you!”

“Absolutely we can play flying, buddy. I missed you too.” Skywalker tucked the toddler against his chest, wrapping a hand gently around the little shock of red hair, and darted a kiss onto his forehead; a very quick one, as Ben was not about to put up with any tiresome snuggling at a time like this. Shifting the boy to one side, Skywalker came up to Mara and managed to steal a kiss, then another one on the cheek from his sister and a shoulder slap from Solo and a row of high-fives from the teenage contingent. “Hey, you three.”

“Uncle Luke, where’s Granddad?”

“Yeah, is he—”

All three teenagers fell abruptly silent and still. Even little Ben went huge-eyed and quiet. The Princess tensed, and Solo’s hand started twitching again where his blaster ought to be.

Framed in the hangar entrance, larger than life, stood Vader. His respirator echoed, commanding the stillness of the whole hangar effortlessly. Piett caught himself holding his breath, in the faint hope that it might make him invisible.

Vader took a single step—paused—looked directly at the Princess, as if asking a silent question. For another long, hard moment she looked back, unrelenting…but finally she gave a small, stiff nod. Vader’s gaze swung away from her down the line of children, and then he approached, step by slow step. Bold-as-brass Jaina looked up, wide-eyed but motionless, as he paused in front of her, studying her face; then he moved on to Jacen…now to Anakin. He paused a little longer there, reaching out to tip the boy’s chin up a little more; the eyes, perhaps, the boy had his uncle’s eyes. Whatever his misgivings earlier in the corridor, his dominant authority and self-assurance projected through the whole cavernous room as emphatically as ever…but something else too. Those three would never dread him as others did; there was almost a caress in his heavy, metal-solid gaze as it drank each of them in.

However, they also looked satisfyingly like three individuals into whom the fear of the gods had just been put. Piett felt he was entitled to smirk just a *tad*—

A tremendous shriek split the silence and probably every eardrum in the hangar. *“Nuzzer* Dada!”

The next sound was a one-toddler stampede as Ben planted his feet against Skywalker’s torso, sprang to freedom, and hurled himself like a ballistic missile into the boots that had rung the footsteps of doom on a thousand worlds.

The spell fragmented like ice under a hammer. Skywalker had his hand clamped over the lower half of his face in a Galactic City second. Solo emitted a single guffaw and then turned bright red trying to swallow the rest, which instantly reduced the junior Solos to alarming choking fits as they tried to follow suit. A slow, glowingly wicked grin overtook the Princess by degrees, presumably as whole new worlds of scope for vengeance unfolded before her. Vader, for his part, stared down at the child bouncing around his ankles as if at some previously undiscovered lifeform.

“Dada, Dada!”

Vader retreated a step, but Ben stuck to him like red on plasma. “I am not *your* father, young one.”

The voice which had struck terror into moffs, admirals, and potentates failed to make the slightest impression on Ben Skywalker, who flung up both arms desperately. “Azzup! Azzup!”

Vader cast about for expert assistance and latched onto Mara, the one straight face in the room. “What is he requesting?”

“He wants up, obviously.”

Vader attempted to shoo Ben toward her with one foot, which was expertly dodged and then clambered on.

“He wants *you* to pick him up,” Mara elaborated.

How she was maintaining that perfectly cool expression neither Piett nor Skywalker nor anybody surnamed Solo was able to say.

Vader, after one further hesitation, reached down with one hand and hoisted little Ben up to chest height. Wide gray eyes reflected in his lenses as the pair studied one another.

“You are impertinent,” Vader pronounced, “and demanding.”

Both qualities obviously met with his complete approval.

Ben spread out one grubby hand and plastered it directly over Vader’s left eyeplate, leaving a massive smear. “Az Dada?” Now face to face, the physical disparity seemed to be confusing him.

“No, bud,” said Skywalker, “that’s Grandpa, remember?”

Ben looked at him, then back at Vader in befuddlement. “Gampa?”

“Yes, he’s my daddy.”

“Dada!”

Jaina collapsed on her father’s shoulder, burying a spasm of laughter in his shirt. Anakin the younger doubled over wheezing, and Jacen—Jacen the blackmailer *had a recorder out.* Because of course he did. Piett could do nothing about it at this point but pinch the bridge of his nose and speculate on which supreme deity he’d offended to deserve this.

“I am *not* your father,” Vader repeated in what was definitely feigned exasperation.

Ben was already on to the next subject, namely the grille of the face mask into which he was sticking his fingers. “Az dat?”

Vader pried the fingers back out. “That is my—”

“Az *dat*?” Now the clasp of the cape.

“That is—”

“Az pay fy?”

“What?”

Skywalker finally took pity on his father and came up to collect the boy. “Maybe Grandpa will play flying with you later, Ben. First we’re going to fly the ship back home. Do you want to help me fly?”

“Az fy wis Dada!” Then a frown at Vader. “Az fy wis *uzzer* Dada?”

“Grandpa,” corrected Skywalker. “You’ll have to ask him.”

“Az come fy wis me, Gampa?”

Vader hesitated. But only a moment. “Very well, little one.”

Chapter End Notes

tbc

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Q: Done by Christmas, huh?
A: Shut up.

Q: So is this the end?
A: Yes! Mostly.

Q: WTF do you mean, “mostly”
A: You’ll see

Q: WHEN will we see?
A: Like…soon.

Q: I swear, if this is one of those “a great many of the truths we cling to depend on our point of view” things again—
A: Would we lie to you?

Q: Yes.
A: ...fair

“Well, sir,” said Piett brightly, watching the *Falcon’s* sublight engines dwindling away towards Coruscant. “I thought that went quite well.”

“Hmmph,” said Vader, rubbing futilely at his smeared eyeplate. What with being clambered on and Granddadded left and right and getting goodbye-kissed on his helmet by his durasteel-nerved granddaughter, it had not been a banner afternoon for the last Lord of the Sith. Piett debated once more whether, as a loyal subordinate, he ought to mention that young Miss Solo apparently preferred matte pink lipstick…but surely said loyal subordinate was due a little amusement at Lord Vader’s expense. Thou shalt not muzzle the ox that treads the corn, and so forth. Anyway, Skywalker would probably notice when he and little Ben got back from collecting his luggage abovedeck. Assuming they weren’t sidetracked by something shiny or fast or dangerous.

Well, if the ship blew up under his feet so be it. Piett had more concrete crises to consider at the moment—

As if in answer to the thought, Deck Officer Mordan and his crew of flight techs respawned back into the hangar; their launch window must be coming up. Droids swarmed, machinery bellowed, and the half-platoon escort of stormtroopers came clattering in through the main hatch. Vader, who likely could have done with a drink—which probably explained a lot right there, come to think of it—instead set about restoring his equanimity at the platoon commander’s expense, finding ten imaginary faults with the unit’s appearance and comportment in as many seconds, but thankfully

leaving Piett at liberty to check his chrono surreptitiously.

He winced. It was in fact fifteen minutes *behind* their launch window. However fast he flew, if Skywalker didn't expedite that packing of his—and how, *how* by all the gods could it take the man this long to sort out *one duffel bag?* hadn't he had to bug out thousands of times with the Rebellion? escaped a thousand traps by the skin of his teeth? been a kriffing *starfighter pilot* trained to go from REM sleep to cockpit in ninety seconds or less?—they might well miss their scheduled arrival window.

Unfortunately, if Piett had learned anything over the last few months, it was that nothing was going to get Luke Skywalker off the *Executor* until he was good and damned ready…but *he* could get off early, couldn't he? Take his own shuttle? It was only a turbolift hop away; and since he had yet to inform Flight Control that Lord Vader's two-year-old grandson had reorganized his afternoon transportation arrangements, it should still be flight-prepped. He could at least beat them down and stall.

Piett cleared his throat, trying to catch Vader's attention over the racket of deploying hoses and whining scrubbers and thundering cargo sleds and his own echoing basso profundo. "Sir, if you won't be needing me, my shuttle is on standby for departure. I shall connect with the ambassador ahead of schedule and make any last-minute preparations for your arrival in…"

He made the mistake of glancing up mid-sentence right into a suspicious lens aimed down at him. Kriff it all, he was usually better at this.

"…Galactic City."

Vader abbreviated his verbal assault on the hapless platoon sergeant—who despite his full-face helmet was projecting a very put-upon expression—and speared him with a Force pike of a stare. "Is there some *urgency*, Admiral?"

"I'm merely aware of the value you place on being timely, sir. The accords—"

"And I am aware of your predilection for catering to the whims of political authorities."

"I believe the term you're searching for is *tact*, sir. As I was saying, the accords still—"

"Tact," said Vader, as if it were an entirely different sort of four-letter word, "is merely a shorter way of spelling *politics*."

Piett did not so much as blink. "I must disagree, sir. It is a valuable strategic skill in certain contexts."

"Such as?"

"Such as when collaborating with a temperamental or obstinate superior."

"Are you suggesting you have experience with such a superior?"

"I would never suggest such a thing, sir. I would make a conjectural statement and allow my superior to draw his own conclusions."

"Tact, I see," Vader said ominously.

"As I was saying, sir," Piett went on, "the accords remain a controversial subject in the Senate and with elements of the opposition. It would be poor strategy to give any avoidable offense before the

final documents are signed. For example, if our delayed arrival requires today's itinerary to be shifted back half an hour."

His imagination presented a detailed vision of the diplomatic arrival terminal lined with foot-tapping diplomats, trigger-happy security details, temperamental Sith Lords, and a Borsk Fey'lya who'd had an extra half hour to come up with new and exciting ways of irritating both himself and Piett's hopes of a successful treaty into early graves.

Vader crossed his arms with malice aforethought. "That would indeed be disastrous."

"It might, sir," Piett said stubbornly.

"I congratulate you on your foresight. Don't let me detain you."

"Thank you, sir." He clicked his heels, nodded, and turned to—

"But first, perhaps you should review for me this itinerary. Let us be certain that I understand *every single detail."*

Piett clenched his teeth for a second, and turned crisply back on his heel with a perfect blandness of expression.

"The itinerary is unchanged, sir. We're scheduled to meet Ambassador Trimarti of the Imperial Remnant, as well as the Minister of State, at Arrianya Bel Iblis Spaceport in approximately"—he made a show of checking his chrono—"twenty-nine standard minutes, following which we will depart for the Senate. Where there is a state reception scheduled for 1900 hours this evening." Vader made a disgusted noise. "Don't worry, sir, I'm told it's been closed to the press."

"Would that it had also been closed to politicians."

"In that case I imagine it would not, in fact, be a state reception, sir. If that is all—"

"Did the ambassador indicate which politicians I am to be subjected to at this *reception*?"

"Hardly any, my lord. Just the State department, really. Oh, and the Senate majority and minority leaders. A few dozen of the senior Senators. The Joint Chiefs, their immediate staff. Probably General Cracken of their intelligence services. A few hundred select representatives from key civic and public organizations."

Vader cast him a decidedly sarcastic glance. "Such as the Jedi, no doubt."

"Oh, no more than thirty or so of them, sir." He suspected the Minister had arranged that to reassure all the guests who did not have lightsabers and arcane powers. Provided the guests were too dense to recall what Vader had done to the last Jedi Order and put two and two together, it might actually work. "I have every confidence that they will be on their best behavior."

Mostly because he'd overheard Skywalker vetting invitees on the holo with his wife a few days earlier.

Vader waved a hand in resignation. "So be it. The signing is scheduled for tomorrow?"

"Oh-nine-hundred GST, sir. Her Highness is expected to be in attendance for that, as well as Grand Admiral Pellaeon of the Imperial Remnant government. If you have no other questions—"

"He was responsible for signing the peace treaty with the Rebellion, was he not?"

“So I’m told, sir. If you have no other questions about the *itinerary*—"

“What is your opinion of this Pellaeon?”

“None, sir,” he bit out. “I’ve not had the honor of meeting him yet. If you please, I really must—”

“Surely, Admiral, if I am to exercise this *tact* of which you speak so highly, it is imperative that I know something about all these distinguished political authorities. With whom did this Pellaeon serve during the Empire?”

Piett glared. “I’m afraid I’ve no idea, sir. Why don’t I go down now and ask him?”

Whatever reply Vader might have begun was drowned out as the hangar’s proximity sirens and lights went off once again—a sound Piett had rarely been so delighted to hear. Someone in Flight Control had apparently had enough initiative to order his shuttle routed back here, rather than impose any more walking on the admiral. Piett made a mental note to find out the name of the officer responsible and sign off on that man’s shore leave orders first. Everyone scattered beyond the safe zone tape, Piett seizing the excuse to preposition himself a little away from Vader at the front of the boarding zone, just as his shuttle entered the outer airlocks—

—or rather as *a* shuttle entered the airlocks. Unless Lord Vader had been up to more extraordinary tricks than usual, that was most certainly *not* his shuttle. It had the sharp slick gleam of a hull just off the assembly lines, so the design was likely no more than five years old. Definitely a military transport; the thing had four tri-laser cannons stacked beneath her prow, besides a curious housing on her belly that probably concealed stern chase mounts of some sort. Her backswept stabilizer wings began rotating as she landed, swinging up and angling back to lock in against her stern. Might be an evolution of the lambda, even; though she must be at least half again the tonnage. Higher passenger capacity, or maybe a cargo—

“*Admiral*,” Vader rumbled behind him.

He shook himself out of his fascination and realized Vader had been saying something or other, though he had no clue what. “My apologies, my lord. I wasn’t aware we had another New Republic vessel inbound. I suppose this must be a military escort.”

“In a sense,” said Vader.

Piett frowned at that. “You…were expecting this vessel, sir?”

Vader ignored the question and instead reached into his belt and withdrew a chip, which he held out to Piett. “Your New Republic identification.”

Piett took it, dumbfounded. “What will I need that for, sir?”

“It is a requirement for civilian interstellar travel within New Republic space.”

“I wasn’t aware this qualified as interstellar travel.” Piett frowned at the chip. Unless he was gravely mistaken, it was the chip that Skywalker had given Vader on the bridge earlier, before they’d come out of hyper into the system. And hadn’t he’d said something about an arrangement, and that the Princess had had a hand? That must mean this escort. But what on earth was it for? This was the capital system, it was fairly swarming with security. “We’re only going down to Galactic City—”

“You are not accompanying me to Galactic City.” Vader made a curt gesture that brought a lieutenant sprinting up out of nowhere, towing a stack of hovercases, and then extracted another

chip from his belt. “Your leave orders.”

Piett nearly fumbled it. “My what?”

“Your leave orders.”

Piett gaped at him, then at the chip. He flicked the little holo display and its information projected up. *Destination: Axxila.*

He nearly dropped it again in his panic. “Sir—I placed no request for—”

“I know precisely what you have and have not done.” Vader crossed his arms. “There is no mistake. It is a disciplinary shore leave.”

Piett dropped the lid. “*Disciplinary?”*

“Yes. Review of your personnel file determined that you have accrued leave time over the past twenty-six years in excess of the allowable sixty standard days, contrary to Imperial naval policy. You are therefore required to expend a minimum of sixty standard days on shore leave before you will be permitted to resume active-duty status.” A forefinger launched at Piett ominously. “See to it that such an oversight does not occur again.”

He did not have the first idea what response to make to such blatant bureaucratic fiction from *Lord Vader* of all people. He was dangerously tempted to laugh. “My lord—I’ve far too much to do right now, we haven’t even finalized the accords with the New Republic, and—and—”

“I will conclude the negotiations,” Vader thundered over him, “and oversee their implementation. Do not imagine yourself to be indispensable.”

“I—well of course not, my lord, but—it’s my responsibility, nonetheless, to see this through to—”

“Your *responsibility* is what I inform you it is.” The finger was practically prodding his nose. “I have already notified your sister of your anticipated arrival forty-six standard hours from now.”

He couldn’t wrap his brain around this. “You—you called Carilla?”

“I am capable of operating a holocom, yes. Delay will only incur her displeasure as well as mine.” His voice became a shade less harsh. “She is most anxious to see you.”

Piett blinked suddenly stinging eyes. “Sir, I can’t. I *can’t*. Not before our men—”

“You have brought them home and have secured their liberty. You have done enough.” Vader laid a hand briefly on his shoulder. “I shall see to what remains.”

Piett had to put a hand to his eyes for a moment to gather his composure. Even in this new phase of camaraderie, even with Skywalker’s influence slowly nurturing his better lights, never in a thousand years had he expected such a gesture from Vader. “Thank you,” he rasped. “Thank you.”

Vader grunted and paced behind him. “You have no cause for gratitude. I reiterate to you that this is a *disciplinary* leave purely owing to your irresponsible management of standard personnel benefits.”

Piett forced a watery smile, stowing his orders and new ident in his jacket. “Yes, sir. I shall not make the mistake of being trapped in Unknown Space for twenty-five years again, sir.”

“You will regret it intensely if you do.” Vader gestured sharply at the shuttle, now extending her

boarding ramp. “Your transport…and escort.”

The ramp had just finished extending, and someone was coming down. Piett squinted—a hoverchair? But who—

He realized who a heartbeat later and abandoned decorum almost the same instant, hurrying over the distance. “Max!”

They’d used to call him Stoneface, but just now Maximilian Veers’ famous granite façade was cracking—lips shaking, eyes blinking fast. He reached up to salute, and his hand trembled a little as he took it all in: the hangar bay, Piett, and, if Piett knew Max Veers, that towering black figure behind him most of all.

“Admiral.” His clipped, polished voice wavered with emotion and old age. “Admiral. I hardly believed it until now.”

Still grasping Veers’ hand, Piett stepped aside to give him a clean view of Vader, who had resumed haranguing the platoon commander but who paused upon sensing Veers’ hungry gaze. Veers let go and raised his hand in another tremulous salute. Vader acknowledged it with a brief nod.

"They don’t make them like that anymore,” Veers said fervently, while he tried to mop his eyes on the sly. “If you knew what it’s been like…everything falling apart…seeing you, him, the Lady… it’s like it never changed.”

“Well,” Piett murmured. “I’m afraid we’ve done our fair share of changing too, Max. He’s different than you’ll remember him.” He aimed a wry smile at his old comrade in arms. “As I suppose you’ll have worked out already, given the average admiral lifespan on this ship.”

Veers settled back, and the martial light that sprang into his eyes was like greeting an old friend all over again. “You’re a canny bastard, Firmus, I always said so. Ozzel’d be spitting foam if he could see how long you’ve hung on. I expect a complete and detailed briefing on how you did it.”

Piett shook his head. “You wouldn’t believe the half of it, Max. If you knew what’s happened just since Eriadu—”

“Unca Peet, Unca Peet!”

Piett turned in time to spot little Ben tear out of the turbolift nearest him, weaving deftly through the various legs between him and the shuttle ramp before stumbling to a fascinated halt at the novel spectacle of a man with no legs in a hoverchair.

“Thank gods,” he said, ignoring the looks of equal bewilderment Veers and Ben were now trading. “What took your father so long?”

“Better question,” muttered Veers, with an uneasy glance in Vader’s direction, “what kind of idiot brings a child aboard an Imperial warship in the first place?”

Little Ben pointed back the way he’d come. “Uz find bey bamman!”

“What?” said Veers; but Piett’s eyes sprang desperately to the turbolift—

—right as His Imperial Majesty the Emperor Palpatine walked out of it. In two splendid, gilt-edged dimensions.

Oh my gods…he didn’t.

“Bey, *bey* bamman,” said Ben happily at Piett’s knees.

Vader’s stentorian voice became suddenly conspicuous by its absence. Piett swallowed, waiting for the other boot to drop. It wasn’t a long wait.

“*What* do you think you are doing with that?”

Skywalker’s cheerful expression popped up over the top of the portrait. “This? It’s mine.”

Vader crossed his arms. Piett coughed and looked down, where he found that Veers had invented a truly remarkable new expression which he would have given a great deal to have recorded. Not as much as he’d have given to go back and *un*-record that damned sabacc game from the history books, obviously—

Veers yanked his sleeve. “Piett—is that—”

“Yes,” Piett sighed. “In the flesh.”

“Skywalker? What the hell is *Luke Skywalker* doing here?”

Where did he even start?

Vader stalked up to Skywalker the better to loom over him and the glaring likeness of his late monarch. “It, like every other fixture aboard this vessel, is the property of the Imperial Navy.”

“That,” said Skywalker, making an elaborate show of putting the portrait down on his foot and leaning his elbows on the top of the frame, “was before I won it.”

Piett couldn’t help noticing the way he so clearly did not say *fair and square.*

“From *whom*?” Vader hissed, leaving no doubt that he had spotted the involvement of some form of Rebel sabacc (now listed *ahead* of stun tag, mouse droid fighting, and cockroach olympiads on the Disallowed Recreational Activities roster, and consequently the most popular form of entertainment aboard). Piett ran a hand over his face, trying to remember when he’d last updated his will and whether he’d gotten round to adding Wesla to the list of beneficiaries.

Skywalker raised an eyebrow. “That’s classified.” He glanced Piett’s way and made a beckoning gesture that brought little Ben scampering over the deck to him.

Veers yanked his sleeve. “Hang on, that’s *Skywalker’s* runt?”

"Yes,” hissed Piett, “and for gods’ sakes don’t call him a—”

“What’s *Skywalker* doing here with his—"

“What do you intend to do with it?” Vader demanded.

“Also classified.”

Piett hoisted his hovercase and cleared his throat again nervously, as Ben started punching the front of the portrait with clumsy little fists and cheering himself on. “I think we should be off, Max.”

Veers, still yanking his sleeve, did not hear him. “Firmus, what in *Vornak*’s name is that Jedi scum—”

Vader leaned forward like a hawkbat stooping for the kill. “And your wife’s opinion of this… acquisition?”

Piett seized the arm of the hoverchair, spun it round—

“I don’t see how that’s your problem, Father.”

Veers made a honking noise and slammed the brake on the hoverchair. He doubled over, clutching the armrests, and stared up at Piett, looking like a human question mark.

Piett burst out laughing.

“Max, that’s not even the half you won’t believe!”

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finis...

...mostly :) Epilogue coming soon!

Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Your brother is crazy, Rilly."

Carilla glared over her cup of spiced touri at her husband. "I beg your pardon?"

"You heard me." Mr. Veritan had not taken a hint for the past thirty-two years and saw no reason to start now. "He's crazy! Absolutely batshit."

"One hundred percent out of orbit," chimed in Wesla, drizzling honey with artistic precision over her flakebread.

China clanged martially. "Your uncle is not *crazy,* and I don't know why *either* of you says—"

She had to stop, being drowned out for the third time in as many minutes by hysterical cackling from the next-door study.

Mr. Veritan pointed his spoon over his shoulder at the study wall and enunciated with relish. "*Bat—shit*."

Carilla, who had gone a fetching salmon color in both cheeks, cleared her throat and readdressed herself to her tea.

"Not that I *blame* him, mind," Mr. Veritan went on, waving the spoon at his wife, "it's a wonder he's got *any* brains left. Never mind twenty-five years in the Unknown Regions, that Vader—"

"Quinius—!"

"—is enough to drive a man batshit in twenty-five *minutes* if you ask me, and don't pretend you don't know I'm right, Rilly. He gave *you* a right turn, didn't he?"

"He didn't give me a *turn*—"

"Didn't give you a turn! You screeched like a jackfinch with its tail on fire, I heard it two floors up—"

"—and I don't think you'd better talk about him, anyway, you heard what Firmus said about him reading…reading minds and things."

"Don't expect he thinks there's much *in* yours, Mum," said Wesla. "I mean, who answers an out-of-system holocall in her bathrobe and hair towel?"

"I thought it was Justus! Who else ever calls us from out-of-system?"

"Well, Uncle Firmus for one—"

The study wall cackled again, this time hard enough to vibrate dust motes off the paint.

“Batshit,” said Mr. Veritan happily.

Wesla frowned. “Maybe you should go check on him, Mum.”

Carilla smoothed her skirt and tried not to blush again. “I really don’t think I ought to interrupt him. That transmission came from the Chief of State’s office, it might be—”

“Important?” Wesla raised an eyebrow at the study wall. The cackling had devolved into wheezing. Mr. Veritan adjusted his hoverchair to a slightly more reclined position and re-addressed himself to his morning copy of the *Axxilan Tribune* with evident satisfaction in this fresh proof of his brother-in-law’s vespertilian excrementality.

“Ahem,” said Carilla. “Yes, I suppose you make a good point.”

She left them snickering over the scones and went and knocked gingerly on the study door where her brother had been shut up for the last quarter of an hour, supposedly watching his mail. “Firmus? Is everything…er, may I come in?”

The door whooshed open.

Firmus was doubled over at the desk, wheezing and crying so hard his sleeve was soaked from mopping up his face.

“Firmus! Are you all right? What—”

Still wheezing too hard to eke out a single syllable, he just clutched his stomach and pointed at the hologram unit and hit the key to repeat the message.

“Hey Admiral!” A dark-haired teenage girl, vaguely familiar-looking, waved at the pickup; two boys leaned in over her shoulders. “We know you’re on leave, but—"

“Nicky here says he owes you one—”

“—something about acing his astronavigation project—"

“—which we all know he didn’t do on his own—”

“—figure if you’re that nice we can trust you not to sell it to a Holonet channel—”

“—and honestly, if anyone’s earned the right, it’s you—”

“—so for your viewing pleasure—”

…

Two meters of death incarnate, destroyer of worlds, commander of armies and navies, master of empires, last true Lord of the Sith—Darth Vader looms before his latest foe, one hand planted on his belt, the other leveling a mighty forefinger.

“You are trapped. It is useless to resist.”

The enemy—sheer impudence!—also plants a hand on his waist and points. “Az tap! Az ussaziss!”

His hand clenches in a fist. “You dare mock me, young Skywalker?”

A fist replies. "Az maccaz Kawakko!"

"Enough. Put down that weapon, and I may be merciful."

"Na-no. Az dada knot!"

"*You are most certainly* not *a Jedi Knight yet. Give me that."*

"Na-no! Az dada knot!"

"So be it."

He lunges—but a blur of motion darts beneath his hand, between his feet—and then a sudden force yanks him backward by the neck—and then, inexplicably, he is staring at the ceiling, limbs askew, cape bunched under one shoulder, listening to the (small and pattering) thunder of his triumphant nemesis carrying off his prize. Truly, he has much yet to learn in the ways of the Force if he is to gain mastery over this new opponent.

In the meantime, perhaps he can order Piett to track down somewhere that sells child-proof clips for lightsabers.

FINIS

Chapter End Notes

About freaking time, right? :D Back when I posted the first chapter I was all lined up for a much earlier ending somewhere around chapter 3, but then I went and got inspired, and off ran my ending five years and an extra 14 chapters down the road. Whereas most of my other stories have been relatively quick writes, MTS became very hard work. Nearly every finished chapter was the product of multiple drafts, restarts, reimaginings, and revisions (I am sitting on literally hundreds of thousands of cut words spread across dozens of drafts and excerpt files, to the point that I routinely got lost just trying to remember which document was the most current). While often extremely frustrating, this marathon taught me a crap ton. Thanks so much to all of you who have kept reading and enjoying and encouraging and generally putting up with my vespertilian excrementality ;) It gives me so much joy to hear from you all.

I do plan to revisit the Limpet AU, hopefully in many future stories; but unfortunately probably not in the very near future, as I just recently started a grad program and am currently being oppressed by Darth Economics and Darth Statistics. So: until next time, may the Force be with you and God bless!

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